REBECCA SAVAGE CONSEQUENCES

Champagne Books

www.champagnebooks.com

Copyright ©2009 by Rebecca Giallongo

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.

CONTENTS

Other Books By Rebecca Savage Dedication **Prologue** One Two Three Four Five Six Seven **Eight** Nine Ten Eleven Twelve Thirteen Fourteen Fifteen Sixteen Seventeen Eighteen **Nineteen** Twenty Twenty One Twenty Two Epilogue

About Rebecca

* * * *

Champagne Books Presents

Consequences

By

Rebecca Savage

* * * *



* * * *

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Champagne Books www.champagnebooks.com Copyright © 2009 by Rebecca Giallongo ISBN 978-1-897445-69-3 September 2009 Cover Art © Amanda Kelsey Produced in Canada

Champagne Books

#35069-4604 37 ST SW

Calgary, AB T3E 7C7

Canada

* * * *



* * * *

Other Books By Rebecca Savage

Coincidence

Combustion

[Back to Table of Contents]

Dedication

For my family because Family Matters! Special thanks to my brother, sisters, nephews, nieces, Mom & Dad & Grandma And especially to my CP: Katie [Back to Table of Contents]

Prologue

Dear Journal,

There are consequences for everything.

Six little chicks, sittin' in a row,

It'll be too late for them, but soon the world will know.

Had to snatch a few bitches,

And now they all need stitches.

I only need one more,

Then I can even the score.

[Back to Table of Contents]

One

"Half naked men and women on the dance floor, gyrating like they have epilepsy or some such thing." *Carpathia*, St. Louis's latest and greatest nightclub, was hopping. Jeni Michele Campanelli closed her eyes and tried to wish it all away. She opened one eye. *Shoot.* She opened the other eye and glared at her two female counterparts. "Well, this is one way to celebrate. All that hard work, and this is how we acknowledge the pain and suffering of years of studying our butts off."

"You bet it is. It's the best way to let loose and relax after what we've been through." Coni Brandon slid into the booth beside Laura Icardi.

"I agreed to come here. You coerced me into saying yes to a dance with some stranger."

Coni's blue eyes twinkled. "Clint's not that bad, and a one night stand with a stranger might be what you need."

Jeni gagged at the images that idea thrust into her mind's eye. "I only danced with him to shut you up, but my submissive streak has run out. I'm going to break Clint's fingers if he grabs my ass again."

"You don't have a submissive streak." Coni hooted like a fool and whistled at the boy-toy giving a girl a lap dance at the next table. "I wanna join that group. They know how to party." Coni winked at Jeni. "Lighten up, Jen. I'm sure you could put the hurt on Clint after all those self-defense classes, but where would that get you?" Laura shoved a drink at her. "Here, Jeni. Drink up. It's called a Flaming Orgasm. If you won't go home with Clint and have a real orgasm, this might be the next best thing. Besides, if you have enough of these babies, you won't notice how plastered we are at the end of the night, and you won't fret about who we go home with." Laura nudged Coni with her elbow. "Maybe, if she has a few of those, she'll go home with Clint after all."

"Oh, I'll notice, and I don't think it's possible to get drunk enough to be unaware of your level of intoxication. We've only been here an hour, and you two are on your way to oblivion. Don't you worry about freaks who might take advantage of you, put drugs in your liquor, rape and rob you?"

"No. We leave that water dousing to you. You could put out a five alarm fire with your humdrum attitude. Where did all that prudishness come from, anyway? I knew your parents. They weren't boring. What latent genetic pool left you so dry?" Laura pushed Jeni's buttons, but Jeni maintained her cool. Jeni *always* maintained her cool.

"Just because my parents were maniacs from the sixties and drove like Mario Andretti on steroids, doesn't mean I have to turn out like them, or end up like them."

Laura dropped her pointy chin onto her fist, drummed her long, apple-red, manicured nails on the table, and looked down her nose at Jeni. "You haven't forgiven them for dying on the day of your high school graduation, have you?"

Jeni gasped. "How dare you ask me that? You know I miss them. You know I loved them."

Coni gulped her drink then plopped the glass on the table. "You blame them for ending up in that ditch dead, and you know it. So much for all those shrinks your parents' life insurance paid for."

Jeni blinked. "I can't be hearing this from you two. We're friends. Practically sisters. You might be drunk, but this is bullshit."

Laura placed her hand on Jeni's and squeezed. "We love you, Jeni, but you're so damn hardheaded. The accident wasn't your dad's fault."

Jeni pulled her hand away. "I told my dad a million times not to ride the ass of the car in front of him. I hated riding with him. And my mom? You'd think she'd have more sense, but no, she swerved in and out traffic like a circus clown on a bike in a ring. So damned careless. How could they have died any other way than in a twenty-car pile up on Highway 270 in St. Louis, Missouri on Memorial Day weekend at 9:00 p.m. on their way to another party after leaving an all day barbecue?" Jeni narrowed her eyes. "Much like this situation. A drunken bash."

Laura tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder and picked up her drink. "This is altogether a different situation. We didn't party all day. We're gonna party all night, instead."

Coni and Laura chinked their glasses together in a salute of sisterhood and nonsobriety. Jeni sighed. *Ten o'clock. Too early to ditch my so-called friends and flee, homeward bound?* The answer would be a resounding *yes* if she asked Coni and Laura, party animals that they were. She scrunched up her face in disgust at the dirty dancers all around her, gyrating and sweating to the too loud music. Jeni gasped as Clint grabbed her wrist and jerked her out of her seat. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Dancing with you again." He reached his arm around her and maintained a death grip on her wrist and another on her lower back. Jeni stiffened into an unyielding board when Clint pulled her closer, but the two-left-footed sot probably had no idea how disgusted she was with him at this inebriated point. He stumbled and stepped on Jeni's bruised toes. She wanted to jab his ankle with a spiked heel. Maybe that'd get him to back off.

Jeni squinted at Coni and Laura over Clint's slumped shoulder. "You better do something. Three so-called dances with this idiot were plenty. I can't handle a fourth."

Coni shifted away and smirked. Laura did the same. Jeni prepared to lay into them with a tongue lashing, but the dork pretending to dance with her reared back and shook his unruly head of sandy blond hair as if to clear his mind and his vision. Surely he wasn't coherent enough to understand her and be offended? He blinked and widened his crossed eyes to an unnatural, glassy stare, probably attempting to focus.

She drew her brows together and opened her mouth to speak. The smelly slob heaved a loud sigh, breathing his alcohol-laden breath into her face and straight up her assaulted nostrils. Jeni teetered on the verge of retching. She might never breathe properly again.

The slug must've looked his fill at her burning-with-anger face. He slouched forward over her bare shoulder and went

back to exhaling on the back of her neck. Jeni came close to vomiting again, inhaling his rancid odor. Why wouldn't he pass out and give her a break?

The song ended, none too soon, in her opinion. She let out a heavy sigh and excused herself from a weaving Clint's slimy clutches. He let go, and she took advantage of his moment of forgetfulness and loose limbs and scurried toward the booth, desperate to escape the lush and his drunken stupor.

Seeking nausea-free solace from the sleaze and his wandering fingertips, she sank into the booth. She didn't have time for him and the problems he could cause her. She didn't have time for any man, yet. She had a plan. Her scheme didn't include the likes of Clint.

"You've got to be kidding." Jeni groaned. The slobbering slug had the audacity to follow her into her area of refuge and sit right next to her, uninvited and unwanted. Jeni stared at Coni. "He can't be serious."

Clint shoved Jeni further into the booth and draped his heavy, limp arm around her. "Who can't be serious? And why should anyone be serious? Serious is overrated."

Coni giggled. "I agree."

Clint waved his hand at a waitress. "I want Sex on the Beach for everyone." He grabbed the waitress' hand. "You know how to make that drink, doll?"

The waitress, her skimpy dress and the come-hither look on her face announcing her availability, winked at Clint and ruffled his hair. "If I don't, I know someone who can get the job done for you. I'll be right back with your drinks. As for anything else you might want? I'm open to any suggestions you might have, but we can discuss that later, baby."

She winked and flittered off, as Laura and Coni perked up at the concept of free drinks. Jeni shook her head. "That's it. *Basta*. I've have enough of this."

Jeni yanked free of the hand Clint hooked around her waist. Clint whined like a baby in protest. "Where're you going, doll?"

Coni and Laura had the grace to blush an apology and grimace when Jeni gritted her teeth and swung from the other side of the open booth, fists clenched, jaws locked. "I'm going to the bathroom."

The ladies nodded in unison, and Jeni grabbed her handbag, stomping toward the restroom. At the last second, she dove to the left and diverted her course, slipping out of the club through a side door and veering toward her old-butfaithful car.

Jeni basked in her newfound liberty from Clint and her socalled gal pals. She'd met Coni and Laura at the club, instead of riding with one of them. She would've been stuck with them and the creep who'd latched onto her if she hadn't been independent enough to come by herself. Of course, she could've kicked the guy to the curb and told him off, but she'd tried to last the evening and endure Clint's advances for the sake of Coni and Laura.

She smirked in victory and pulled her cell out of her small clutch purse, dialing Coni. Voice mail picked up. Jeni rolled her eyes. Typical. "I'm out of there. Wasn't into the overglorified bar and dance club scene." Jeni hesitated an instant. Something akin to remorse slid through her, but she ignored it, lifted her chin, and refused to give in to guilt. She'd had enough of that. "Sorry I stuck you two with Clint the persistent perv, but I figure you guys are pros. You can get rid of him if you want. If not, you can take him home and have a threesome. It wouldn't be the first time, now would it, girls?"

She hit end and shoved her phone back in her purse, the one matching her ridiculous heels and sparkly, sequined, little black dress that might as well have been a second skin. She shrugged off the last vestige of guilt and picked up speed.

Head held high, Jeni walked toward her car. She didn't need to party to fill her days and nights this summer. Tons of things would keep her busy. She could get a jump on the research required in order to complete her doctoral dissertation. She planned to finish the thing in record time, so she could sculpt it into a nonfiction book later.

She refused to fail or shirk her responsibilities. She needed to focus and think ahead. First step, education, next step professorship, with tenure. She needed to be published for that.

Then she'd see about getting married and living the American Dream of the perfect husband, two perfect kids, a boy and a girl, and the perfect house in the suburbs.

Had she been *less* focused on her studies and *more* relaxed, she probably could've enjoyed the cool, June night air more. A soft breeze flowed through the massive trees lining the quiet side street where she'd parked her ancient-but-reliable, powder-blue Chevy Cavalier.

The light wind brushed the thick leaves in the high oak and maple tree tops together. She lifted her chin and let the gentle wind blow across her face. She paused to enjoy the rarity of the occasion before continuing on her fixed path both to her car and in life.

Taking a deep breath, Jeni got back on track, striding at a brisk clip toward her clunker. She loved her car and couldn't bring herself to sell. Nor could she afford to. Not until she finished her PhD and got a real job.

She longed for her comfortable tennis shoes. The spiked heels she'd bought at the mall during the all-out shopping spree and make-over marathon Coni and Laura had talked her into were an unnecessary expense. The senselessness of it all annoyed her as she dug in her purse for her keys. She'd been so frivolous. Not to mention careless, parking so far from the entrance of the club.

Jeni stilled. How odd. Not a single soul wandered along the silent side street where she'd parked her beloved rust bucket. She'd been trying to save money by parking so far away, but she hadn't planned on meeting some clown, or escaping him, Coni and Laura. She hadn't counted on diving out the side door of the club, alone, either.

She reached for her mace and her keys and grimaced. *Men* are such jerks.

Jeni shivered. A small prick of apprehension entered her consciousness. Was someone watching her? The skin crawled on the back of her neck, and her spine tingled. The hair on her arms stood on end. Her heart stuttered, and the rhythm picked up speed. She turned. Nothing. No one. Somewhat convinced of her safety, and her paranoia, she shrugged off the eerie feeling, squared her shoulders, and told herself to stop being ridiculous. This had always been one of the safest areas of St. Louis. She had nothing to worry about.

Still, a lingering feeling of doubt mingled with the dread of something ominous and dangerous. Worry etched itself under her skin and remained lodged at the base of her neck and in the back of her mind. Fear insinuated itself in her psyche and refused to budge. She looked around again. Nothing. She couldn't shake the feeling. She sprinted for her car, noisy, uncomfortable, clicking heels and all.

Horror happened in a heartbeat. Something flashed in her car window as she reached to unlock her door. Something scraped the pavement behind her. The sharp pain of the impact of a blunt object exploded on the back of her head.

Then ... nothing.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Two

Jeni awoke to intense pain, utter darkness, and absolute silence.

Dazed and groggy, she was afraid to move. Where was she? How had she gotten here? What'd happened to her? She tried to think. She tried to remember. It came to her with sudden clarity. She'd been hit over the head by someone. But who? And why? What'd she done to deserve this? She didn't have any enemies. Hell, she didn't even have time for friends or some stalker-type psychotic boyfriend-wanna-be trying to pick her up at a club. She gagged at the memory of Clint. Had he done this to her? She doubted it. He'd been drunk as a skunk.

What now? Should she move? She started to do just that. She hesitated. What if whoever had done this to her lurked close by, waiting for her to wake up? What would her captor do then?

Jeni swallowed back the bitter bile in her constricted throat. She shuddered. Which was the more frightening prospect? Not knowing what *had* happened to her? Or thinking about what else *might* happen to her?

Jeni shivered. She'd rather try to get away and forget about both. Sitting here accepting the consequences wouldn't cut it. She'd never been passive, and she wouldn't start now.

Jeni tried to move and winced. Sharp jabs of pain erupted throughout her entire body. Her head throbbed. She probably

had a concussion, after being hit so hard over the head. She had to try. She needed to escape.

Problem. She was firmly attached to something solid behind her, and her eyes were covered with something that felt like ... duct tape? Her hands and feet were wrapped in the same unforgiving material. Her entire body was mummified with something, a material with no give, restricting any movement she attempted to make. She was stuck.

Suffocating terror gripped at her, making her dizzy and sick to her stomach. Jeni feared if she vomited, she'd choke to death on her own regurgitation. Her mouth was covered by the same substance masking her eyes and anchoring her to the cold metal pole behind her.

She tried to see. She couldn't open her eyes. Hopeless. She tried to move. She was trapped. Impossible.

She tried to hear. Nothing, at first, then breathing, and sobbing. She wasn't alone? *Che cosa? What's going on?*

There was no way to communicate with her mouth secured this way. She couldn't move to reach and help whoever else was there with her, possibly worse off than she was. Obviously, whoever was there with her, it was *not* her captor. A criminal wouldn't be sobbing. Another wave of nausea and fear gripped her. She wasn't going anywhere, and neither were her fellow captives.

How was she, anyway? How did she feel? How badly was she hurt? She had a pounding headache, and she was sore, everywhere. Her muscles screamed for relief and movement. They'd become stiff from being wedged in the same position, unable to move for however long she'd been tied here. The numbness in her hands, feet, and legs made her nervous. She didn't want to lose a limb or any toes or fingers due to a lack of blood circulation. Other than that, she didn't think she had any broken bones. No open wounds. No bleeding.

Somehow, that didn't make her situation any less excruciating. Trepidation seized her. Others suffered with her, and they might've been there for a while. She had to worry about what was to come. Whoever did this to her and her fellow victims was sadistic enough to leave them there to die a slow and agonizing death. That seemed to be the plan, unless the slug planned to come back and do them even more harm, torture them or...

Her gut wrenched with wild apprehension and sickening dread. She thought, again, she might heave. Anxiety flooded her senses. How many others surrounded her? She worried some of them might already be dead, and that gruesome thought brought her to the brink of fainting. She tried to shake her woozy head, breathe deep, and clear her mind of the rising panic. She had to think. She had to keep her composure. She refused to hyperventilate.

The air smelled dusty, felt dry, and sounded hollow. Echoes of soft cries reverberated around her. Where could she possibly be? How would anyone be able to find her and save her here? It was obviously not a place where people showed up very often. It reeked of abandonment.

The foreboding of what was to come took hold of Jeni and made her shake with revulsion. She wept and tried to scream through her gagged mouth. *Aiuto me. Help me.* No use. No way was much sound going to penetrate her thick gag, and she couldn't escape her restrictive bonds. So much for her perfect plan.

* * * *

Dear Journal:

I got #7 last night, a twit from a bar.

And I had to tell you about it. You're the only one who understands. You're a part of me, a part I can share reality with. If not for you, I'd have no one to talk to. Keeping you was the best idea those loser shrinks ever had. I'm alone in this shitty world. Well, maybe not, but I might as well be. The people surrounding me are clueless. They're in a blissful daze, an untruth, and they don't even know it.

Back to #7.

A twit a day, seven women to slay.

How's that for poetic justice? Not bad for a week's worth of work. More satisfying than my 'real' job. Still, I'm not truly happy. Their deaths might make me feel a bit better, but they won't cure the pain. She left a gaping hole in my already broken heart. I thought she loved me, but she doesn't. I'm nothing to her, and for her indifference, I'll make her pay. She should never have led me on, then rejected and denied me. I wanted her, and I thought she wanted me. Then she told me she wanted nothing to do with me ... ever ... she never had. I thought I had finally become worthy of someone's love. Now I know better, and there is no longer any reason to try. But if I can't have her, nobody will.

Cruel world. Darts at me are hurled.

Even my own mother didn't love me. Mother. Ha. The only 'motherly' thing she ever did was to give birth to me. Who knows who my father is? My mother certainly never knew. She was a whore, and her so-called 'clients', both men and women, started touching me when I was about nine. They began forcing themselves on me when I was twelve, and she let them. She probably even got paid for it. She was so drunk and high and out of it most of the time, the creeps would leave her bed and come to mine just to get a freebee, and their money's worth since she passed out on them. I hated them, and I hated her for allowing it to happen to me. I still hate them all.

Well, she finally got what was coming to her. She was murdered by one of her own 'clients', while I was at school. He beat her to death, and I came home and found her. I saw her and just stood there, looking at her for a minute. I picked up the phone and called 9-1-1. It served her right to die that way.

At age fifteen, I entered the foster care system and got sent to a series of useless shrinks. Ha. What do they know? The only good idea any of them ever had was for me to keep this journal. At least I have someone, or something, to talk to that understands me.

Number seven was such an easy target. Just like the other six. What is it about the women in this city? They walk around alone and brainless, as if in a fog of faith. They don't even look around them. They trust they'll be safe. The idea of someone like me, out there to get them, barely touches their consciousness. They didn't grow up the way I did. If they had, they'd know better than to be alone anywhere, anytime, without a weapon, or some type of self-defense training. Not that any of that would save them against me. I know how to get around all that mess. But they'd watch their backs. And not trust anyone. Not even their mothers.

Wait until I'm finished with that slut who led me on and snuffed out any hopes I had of being cared about. I'm setting her up good. She has no idea what's about to hit her. Everyone will think she kidnapped and murdered the seven beauties from her own club, Carpathia. She's being framed, and she doesn't even know her customers are being abducted yet.

The missing girls' faces are making the headlines. They're being plastered all over the news, and their 'loved ones', what a joke, are desperately hoping they'll be okay and coming home. But they won't be. I'll make sure of that.

As soon as they all die of dehydration and starvation, I'll frame her, and notify the authorities of where to find the girls. All of them. At least their corpses. I'll make sure she gets punished for the crime, and for rejecting me. She won't get away with hurting me. Wait and see.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Three

Homicide Detective Nicolas Tarentino, St. Louis Police Department, pulled onto *the* side street, the one where his fiancée had been brutally murdered one year ago today.

"Ready, bro?" John Tarentino, Nick's fireman brother, the middle child, studied him from the passenger seat.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"You want us to wait here or come with you?" Sal Tarentino, Nick's lawyer brother, oldest of the three, had always been Nick's great protector. Not this time. No one could fix his issues, and they hadn't protected him from heartbreak. Not that it was their fault, and blaming others wouldn't help, but Nick couldn't let it go. He held on to the pain and rage. If he let it go, he'd have to let Isabella go, and that would never happen.

"Wait in the car, but thanks for tagging along for moral support."

"This is about more than that, and you know it. It's about forgiving and forgetting." John pulled his Chicago Cubs baseball hat up from his forehead and pulled it down on the back of his head, making it easier for him to give Nick a measuring gaze, which Nick didn't appreciate one bit. He'd already heard it all, and all the shrinks in the world wouldn't change his mind about hating the dregs of the earth.

"Not gonna happen, man." Nick found the idea that John or anyone else could erase the hatred bubbling inside him ludicrous and unwanted. Not that John wasn't a comfort to him. He was, and so was Sal. Nick's family was the best. They hadn't been able to drag him back from what they called the land of the dead, but that was mostly because Nick fought them every step of the way. He didn't want to heal. He wanted to hate, and he wanted revenge.

John twisted in his seat, checking out the area. "Gloomy as ever in this neighborhood, huh?"

"Oughta blow the place up and start over."

"That's a bit cynical and militaristic, even for you, Nick." Sal grimaced and leaned forward from the backseat, resting his chin on his forearms, tipping his St. Louis Cardinals cap back. Nick suppressed a grin, and the urge surprised him. Only his brothers' rivalry over baseball could humor him at this point. "Whatever. You know how I feel about this place and the vermin who breed here."

"Maybe another night would be better. Maybe we should come back when you're in a good mood." John reached in his pocket, pulled out a pack of gum, and shoved a piece in his mouth as he offered a stick to his siblings.

Nick shook his head at the gesture and the suggestion. "This *is* my good mood."

Sal took the gum, and John heaved a sigh and crossed his arms. Nick couldn't deal with John's frustration. He'd been facing his own frustrations for a year, and worse, something bothered him now. A disturbing feeling pummeled him. He couldn't quite put his finger on exactly what pounded through him. Was it a premonition of something terrifying about to occur in his already messed up life? Or was it the remnants of rage dwindling with time? Nick flinched. He never wanted the rage to dwindle. He preferred to hold onto the burning anger within, the anger driving him to do what he did now, his job. He needed the loathing and the guilt to keep him going and give him his hard edge that made him a good cop. Nick accepted nothing less than being the best at seeking out murderers and sending them to prison for the rest of their lives. He'd rather do his job and get his vengeance.

"The graffiti is different." John rolled his window down and studied the drawings.

"Yeah, but not gone. We clean it up, and the sons of bitches do it again." Nick came to a slow rolling stop, put the car in park, and let the engine idle.

Breathing hard, his heart pounded like a battering ram against his chest, he stared at the spot where Isabella's car and her body—had gone up in flames. His stomach lurched at the charred memory embedded in his mind's eye. He gripped the steering wheel so tight his hands ached, and his knuckles turned bone white. He didn't care. Maybe the pain in his body could ease the ache in his heart. He doubted it.

"You okay, bro?" John rolled his window back up and turned to face Nick.

"No. Tomorrow should've been my one year anniversary." Nick gritted his teeth and locked his jaw. He clamped his mouth closed, even as the bitter bile came up into his throat, threatening to exit through his thinned lips. He released the steering wheel and tightened his hands into fists. He slammed them against the dashboard and cursed with the vehemence of a demon. "You've got to get past this, Nick. Facing your past is supposed to help you heal. It worked for me." Sal would say something like that, and he had every right to. He knew all about getting over tragedy and injustice. So did John, but Nick wouldn't give up as easily as they had. He had his reasons, and he was sticking with his plan.

"Yeah, but you had a good woman to help you through. Don't get too high and mighty, though. Especially, you, John. You waited a long damn time before dating again."

Overwhelmed and murderous, Nick forced himself to inhale and calm down. He'd taken anger management classes after the incident. He'd wanted to kill every criminal he ran into, hoping he'd get the one who'd done this despicable crime. They never found Isabella's killer, and they never would. He knew that, but he didn't have to like it, or even accept it.

"Maybe that's what you need, Nick. A good woman." Sal's suggestion twisted the knife in his gut. He'd had a good woman. He'd lost her to idiots.

Nick gave a harsh laugh. "Yeah, a woman. She'd love me and my cynical ways." He shook his head. "I don't think so. No woman could put up with my bad attitude, and I'm not exactly in the mood to coddle anyone. Isn't that what women want? Coddling?"

John rubbed his chin. "Not my wife. She's stubborn as the day is long. Sal's wife is even tougher, and if you think about it, Isabella wouldn't want to be coddled, either. You know my opinion about that, and you know how the family feels, and how Isabella would feel. She'd want you to be happy." "She'd want to be alive, and that's enough. End of conversation. I didn't bring you here so you could give the same old lecture about my future happiness, unloading the past and living for Isabella."

"I know that, Nick. Believe me. I know that." Sal leaned back in his seat and pulled the cap back down over his forehead.

Nick worked his clenched jaws and opened and closed his tight fists. He needed to get rid of some of this overpowering tension. He closed his eyes then opened them. He reached for his keys and shut down the engine.

Nick braced himself and grabbed the rose from between the two front seats, the long stemmed black rose, the one he planned to place on the sidewalk where Isabella had died in a brutal, unspeakable way. "The anniversary of her death slipped up on me. How could I let that happen?"

"It's not as if you haven't spent every day for the past year thinking of her." John pulled his Cubs hat back down over his forehead. So his brothers were shutting him out. They were fed up. He couldn't blame them. He was fed up with lots of things, but he'd never give up. He'd fight crime until the day he died.

"It's the least I can do. You should get why I'm here, John."

"I get it, Nick. I had to say my goodbyes, too. Remember?"

Nick flinched. "I'm sorry. Yes, I remember, and I remember it took you a long time to get over Amy and move on. I don't think I'm that strong, and I haven't moved on."

Sal leaned forward again, his hat once again pushed back. Why didn't he take the damn thing off? "We get that you need to place this rose, a memento and a symbol of her death and your eternal love for her, on the murder site, but we don't think it's enough. We think it's one more step on your way to revenge, and it has nothing to do with getting over her."

John pushed his hat back up, too. Whose team were they on, anyway? Not his. "You visit her graveside and arrest criminals, as payment for your supposed inadequacies. You blame yourself for not being there for Isabella when she needed you most, but she would never blame you." John touched his arm. "Say goodbye, Nick. Let Isabella go. You both deserve to rest in peace."

Nick pulled his arm away. "Peace is a fairy tale."

He gripped the flower, ignoring the sharp prick of the thorn biting into the palm of his hand. He squeezed the rose stem, opened the car door, got out, and slammed the door. He stalked across the pavement. Each step took him closer to that night and the disgusting memories. He shuddered. He could hear the sounds now and smell the odors.

Nick halted and weaved, off balance. He stuck his hand out to catch himself, using a light post to keep himself upright. His equilibrium intact, he took the final step and tossed the rose onto a manhole cover blackened by the fire and smoke of that horrible night. He plopped down on the curb and ran his shaky hands through his hair. He grabbed a handful of his mane in each hand and bent forward, trying to keep from retching.

So much for being on vacation.

"Nick?" John leaned out the window.

Nick put up a hand and waved John off. "Stay in the car. I have to do this alone."

"Don't pass out on us. We don't want to have to carry you back to this car."

"Shut up. I'm fine."

Nick had come here so many times over the past year, guided by instinct and driven by guilt and a desire for justice. Now he was here to simply grieve. He lived and worked as a creature of habit, albeit a morbid one. He functioned simply, like any man. So why had this happened to him, and Isabella?

Nick shook his head and spoke aloud, as if Isabella could hear him, "I'm so sorry, Isabella, so damn sorry. I can't find them. I can't find the animals that killed you."

Nick tore his hands from his hair and shoved himself to his feet. He stared at the rose. "I miss you. They stole you from me, and I despise them for it."

No answer.

Nick hadn't expected one, but he sure wished she'd show up and tell him who the hell had slain her. Even her ghost would be a welcome sight. He stuck his hands in his worn jean pockets. "Some bachelorette party, huh, honey?"

Nick bit back another curse. "Filthy gangsters and their despicable initiations."

At least that was what all the evidence pointed to. He'd lost the only woman he'd ever loved and wanted to marry to their ignorance and terror tactics.

A car pulled onto the street and came to a screeching halt. Nick narrowed his eyes. Who the hell could that be? Nick glanced at his waterproof watch, the one Isabella had bought him. He squinted at the car at the end of the street. Normal people didn't cruise this section of the city after midnight. Nick scoffed at the irony of his passing thought. He didn't count himself as exactly normal.

Nick drew his brows together even further. The vehicle backed out of the area, turned, and pulled away. Nick couldn't see the person at the wheel at this distance and with this dim lighting.

Nick furrowed his eyes to slits, glaring in deep concentration. Those lights looked familiar. Square tail lights. He'd have to see what type of car had those. Not many makes and models were shaped like that. Except cop cars and a few expensive models no one around here would drive.

He took an involuntary step in the direction of the disappearing car. It made no sense. No one he knew would come near this area, not anymore. No one except him, that is.

John opened the car door. "What's up, Nick?"

"Nothing. I'm sure it's nothing. Get back in the car."

Nick stepped back to where he had the rose in his peripheral vision. John ducked his head back into the car and slammed the door shut. Nick couldn't stop staring in the direction the lights had disappeared. The fact that someone else was on this street, now, troubled him. He'd come here several times at this time of night for the last year. He'd never seen anyone on this street before.

Shrugging, Nick chalked the arrival of the night owl up to the possibility someone doing the same thing Isabella had, heading home from *Carpathia*. She'd been celebrating with her friends, and she'd died alone, within minutes of her home, smack dab between the safety of the club and the protection of Nick.

Nick shivered. He hadn't saved her. He hadn't protected her. What could he have done differently? Why hadn't he offered to drop her off and pick her up? Nick spat. Why couldn't he find the murderers and at least redeem himself that way?

Useless. All these thoughts are completely useless, and so are my efforts at finding Isabella's killers.

Nick peered at the wall behind the manhole. The graffiti had been painted over then replaced by more. In his mind's eye, Nick could see the callous words of hate and victory and death some sick gang member had left behind in black spray paint: *Die, bitch*.

Nick shuddered. The disturbing memory of that night remained vivid. A stab of guilt and a wave of revulsion brought him close to heaving up his guts. He'd been having the time of his life at his own bachelor party while Isabella was being cut down in the prime of her life.

"I'll make it up to you, Isabella. I promise."

Nick had sworn to get revenge on the dregs of society and spend the rest of his life finding the killers of innocent people and putting them behind bars. He dragged his fingers through his now-seriously-tousled hair and exhaled an unsteady breath. As usual, this was getting him nowhere, and his growing frustration had turned into fury. He staggered, blinded by emotion, in the direction of his car. Angry, hurt, and cursing like a sailor, he paid little attention to his footing. He stumbled over the manhole cover and fell flat on his face. Cursing louder in anger now and directing his fury at the offending manhole cover, Nick stood up, dusted himself off, and kicked the damn cover.

That's when he heard it. Or did he? At first, he wasn't really sure he'd heard anything, or, if he had, where it'd come from. He stilled, and he heard it again, a faint, unidentified sound. He rubbed his chin. What was that noise? A muffled cry for help, or a woman's stifled scream?

In his half-crazed state, Nick thought, Isabella?

No. She's gone. His heart pounded unmercifully in his chest, and blood roared in his ears so loud he'd be surprised if he could hear anything else. He stood in the middle of the sidewalk, with nothing but warehouses all around, in the middle of gangland. Surely, he imagined things.

John opened the door and got all the way out this time, followed by Sal. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing." Nick started to move away, annoyed with himself.

Another sound stopped him dead in his tracks. His skin turned ice cold, but his blood ran hot and furious. Frantic, he turned in all directions, confused and going in circles, like a dog chasing his tail. Desperate, he tried to determine the location of the sound, knowing it came from close by. His eyes skittered, and landed, here, there, everywhere. Nothing.

John strode toward him, Sal on his heels. "What the hell, Nick?"

"I don't know. I heard something. I don't know." Nick could feel it, a deep sense of foreboding. The tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood erect and tingled. Looking for a possible hiding spot, he listened, all ears.

He heard the noise again, a little louder, and more distinct.

With a jolt, he realized where the sound came from: the manhole, the one he'd tripped over. Someone was under the street, sobbing. *Why*? What on earth would someone be doing down there?

John came to a halt in front of Nick, Sal smacked into him. "What was that?"

"I doubt any of us really want to know, but I'm sure as hell gonna find out."

Nick's cop instincts took over. He knew better than to stick his head into the hole. Someone might blow a hole in his thick skull. He had to figure out what happened and get help for someone if they were in need of it, but he wouldn't go down there without a flashlight and his weapon. "Give me a minute."

"Nick, call for backup. Don't go down there."

"You call for backup, John. The number's 9-1-1."

"I know that, you stubborn fool. You're gonna get yourself killed one of these days. You can't be playing hero like this." John cursed as he hit the numbers on his cell.

Nick rushed to his car and got a light. He tugged at the cover until it loosened, shoved it to the side with a grunt and a curse, lay flat on his stomach above the hole, and pulled his nine mm from its holster. He stuck it in the hole first. Nothing happened, so he stuck his head into the manhole with the caution of experience, along with his light and gun.

Nick's heart failed him. A woman sat at the bottom of the ladder leading down into the hole. Anger boiled in his blood. He could never understand how anyone could do this sort of thing to another human being, and he never got used to it. He lurched to his feet. "Give me the phone, John."

"Why? What did you see?"

"Look."

John edged toward the hole and voiced Nick's opinion with a chain of profanity a mile long. "Not here. Not now. This won't help you a damn bit, will it?"

Sal dropped down to look and had the same reaction John did. They lay face down staring in the dark hole, lit only by the dim street lights.

"Won't help her, either. Who's on dispatch?"

"Melissa."

"Good. Hey, Mel. Get an ambulance and backup down here." He explained the situation, trying to hold on to professionalism.

"How did you find someone in a manhole in the middle of the night, and what the heck are you doing out there?"

Nick climbed into the hole, thinking of the irony of the situation: the rescue of an innocent woman, where his own beautiful, loving fiancée had been slaughtered. John followed him down, and Sal waited up top. "Just dumb luck, Mel. Just dumb luck."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Four

Nick assessed the strange situation and his immediate surroundings. He shined his light around him in the near vicinity, checking for and avoiding imminent danger. He moved closer to the woman and examined her. "You've got to be kidding me. She's encased in duct tape."

Nick swore, bitterness escaping before he could reel it in. The woman jumped and tried to shrink away. He'd frightened her. "Sorry, that wasn't for you. I'm pissed off at whoever did this to you."

Nick handed the light to John. John took the light and stepped back. Nick tried to keep his voice low and even. "Whoever the SOB was, he's done a thorough job."

The woman's mouth was gagged, and her eyes were blindfolded. Her hands and feet were bound, and tape encircled her entire upper body. Nick could barely see the woman for the material fastening her to the pole behind her. The abductor had nearly encased her in the tape, snuggly attaching her to the ladder.

John moved back closer and focused the light on the duct tape, scanning her body. "No way would she have gotten out of this by herself."

"Hell, no."

The woman whimpered and shook like mad. He hadn't identified himself so she was probably afraid of him. He knelt beside her and spoke in a soothing tone. "It's okay. I'm a police officer. Detective Nick Tarentino, at your service. The man with me is my brother, John, a fireman. Can't beat that for a chance rescue, can you?"

Might as well try to lighten the situation and make an attempt at relaxation. John followed suit. "Nick's right about that, young lady, and don't be afraid. We're gonna get you out of here. We have to take it slow, though. Removing this much duct tape is gonna be painful. Do you understand? *Capito*? Nod your head."

She nodded, the limited movement enough to be considered a positive response. Nick shook almost as violently as she did, out of anger. She could probably sense he wasn't much calmer than she. It was always hard for Nick to remain unruffled and aloof in these types of situations, even though he was a cop and should be able to maintain an air of professionalism. John looked calm as a cucumber. The jerk. Fireman or not, shouldn't he be freaked out that they'd stumbled onto this insanity right in the middle of a memorial to Isabella?

Nick grimaced. This situation was different. He usually dealt with *dead* bodies.

John positioned the light on the woman's face. Nick studied her, pulled out his police issued knife, and leaned in for a closer look, trying to decide what to do next and how to go about freeing her.

He kept his voice low, doing all he could to reassure her and make her feel safe. "The removal of the duct tape will be painful, especially from the tender skin around your eyes and mouth. Understand?" Nick examined her attire and her position. From what he could see, she was beautiful. He could tell this even with the massive amounts of duct tape covering so much of her well-rounded form. She wore a skimpy dress, revealing every delectable curve in her body, shapely legs, and luscious breasts. The cleavage was more obvious with the low cut of the evening wear and the effect of the tape, pressing her arms together and forcing her breasts upward and out.

What the hell am I doing? She's suffering and terrified, and I'm sitting here like an imbecile, practically drooling and ogling her. And with John looking on.

He hadn't even touched her yet, and he'd have to in order to loosen her bonds. Nick took a deep, cleansing breath, trying to get control of his wayward thoughts and curb his emotions. He froze. What emotions? He thought he'd lost them all. Now this? Bad timing. Really bad timing.

He glanced at John and worked hard to sustain a steady voice. "I'm going to reach behind her and cut through her restraints. Can you shine the light for me?"

John nodded and dropped to his knees. Nick leaned toward the woman's ear. "Hold still. I don't want to cut you. I'm going to reach over and behind you. I'll cut the tape off and separate you from the ladder. I want to make you more comfortable before I take the bandages from your face. Okay? *Va bene*?"

She nodded. Nick reached behind her. She leaned her head on his shoulder and let out a half-whine, half-sigh, signaling her obvious relief and gratefulness. The sound nearly melted his frozen heart. He leaned back. He needed a minute.

John spat. "What kind of sadistic person does this to another human being?"

"The kind who'd kill someone like Isabella." Nick focused on his brother's face. "And your Amy. The kind you wouldn't want getting close to your wife and child."

John's eyes flashed, and he gave a curt nod. "This doesn't look like typical gang activity."

"Yeah, and what's so normal about gang activity?"

"That's not what I meant."

Nick shoved to his feet. "I know, and now's not the time to bicker about it or to talk gang psychology. Let's get her out of here."

Someone as beautiful as this woman shouldn't have to put up with this. Of course, this woman, and others like her, vulnerable as they were, were exactly the type an evil SOB like this perp always attacked, not someone tough and capable of protecting themselves. The same kind of animals had preyed on Isabella.

A stab of guilt and regret struck him. Nick's body jerked. He'd come here to feel closer to his murdered fiancée and get some closure. Drooling over a helpless woman showed how disgusting and incompetent he was. He didn't know which part of this scenario made him feel more like a jerk.

Nick leaned forward and enclosed the woman with his arms on either side of her, in an attempt to reach behind her to cut away the tape. She turned into his arms and the maneuver became a delicate embrace. He put his left arm around her waist and pulled her to him, as close as the confines of her restraints allowed. He sheltered her, his right hand cupping her tape-encased face. The woman nudged her head up under his chin, inhaling fast but deep, and exhaling just as quick. She went limp in his arms, having apparently released the stress and alarm engulfing her. She trusted him. He wished it made him feel worthy. It didn't.

Nick stiffened. He sucked in a breath and held it. The sharp intake of air into his nasal passage, so near to the bound woman's silky-smooth hair, forced her intoxicating scent into his now-burning lungs. A shiver of delicious, long-dormant awareness sprang through him and caused his nostrils to flare, wide and wistful. He tried to shake his head and come to his senses. He had no right to think or feel this way. He didn't deserve the pleasure. He hadn't allowed himself to enjoy a woman's company since...

Another surge of guilt struck him. This woman remained in pain and frightened, and he thought of how good she smelled, her soft beauty, and how good she felt in his arms, among other things he'd begun to picture in vivid detail in his desperate, warped mind as he held her to him.

How ironic. He'd come here to think of one woman and held another. More irony. He'd come here to try to get closure from one act of violence toward a woman he'd loved and planned to marry, and he'd saved another woman from almost certain death.

Was this a miracle? A blessing? Or a curse?

John had lost patience. "Nick, what's the problem? Cut the dang tape, and let's get out of here."

Putting his arms around this woman, however good she smelled and felt, wasn't such a bright idea, after all. Nick released her from his impromptu embrace and moved around to one side of her, blocking the light John held.

"If you'll hold still, I'll get you out of here." His voice sounded clipped and cool even to his own ears, but he didn't care. She needed to stop wiggling, and he needed to get back to professionalism. He glanced at John and raised his voice so Sal could hear. "There's still a possibility of danger. Who knows where the perpetrator is. He could return at any moment to finish the job."

"I got your back from up here, Nick."

"I got your back down here, bro."

Nick nodded. "I know. You guys always have my back, even when I don't like it."

John nodded, and Nick made quick work of cutting the woman loose from the ladder then worked on the tape around her eyes, peeling away the sticky material from the soft skin of her beautiful, heart-shaped face. He waited, anxious, for her to open her eyes.

At first, she didn't. Then she did, blinking, trying to adjust to the light of the flashlight John held on her face. It was almost Nick's undoing, looking into her delicate face, into those fathomless eyes, onyx and doe-like. She stared back, right into his. Wide-eyed and bewildered, her eyes darted back and forth from John to Nick. The barrier of the cold, thick, icy-chunk he'd placed around his heart slipped a little more. He'd better work fast and free her the rest of the way. A tear developed behind her long, thick lashes. He wouldn't be able to take that right now. A woman's tears were something he'd never handled well. He was out of his league here, out of his usual realm of duty, rescuing a victim, instead of searching for her killer.

Just as he removed the last of the tape from her mouth, the sirens screamed the approach of emergency vehicles. It'd only been a few minutes since Nick dropped into the hole, but it seemed like an eternity.

Sal smiled down at them. "Here comes the cavalry."

She sucked in a deep breath then heaved a raspy sigh. "Oh, thank you. Thank God. What about the others? Are they okay?"

What the hell?

"What others?" John jerked the light to Nick's face.

The woman blinked and glanced all around her into the darkness shrouding them. Confusion masked her striking features, and a horrified look crossed her picture-perfect face.

A sound to his left surprised Nick, and he grabbed the light from John. He whirled around and shined the beacon in the direction of the unidentified noise, further away from them than during his initial assessment of the area. He rose to move around objects in the path of his vision, pointing at John, telling him with hand signals to stay back and keep quiet.

Nick cursed himself for not having been more careful and observant. They could've been attacked. The kidnapper might be in the hole, hiding. He'd been so intent on the woman, his attention diverted by her delectable beauty and intoxicating scent. He hadn't done his job. He spat. He couldn't afford to screw up like this, in his professional or personal life, not that he had a personal life, not that he wanted one.

Shocked, Nick stared at another woman, around a corner, hidden from his view by pipes and wires. Holding back a curse and suppressing his temper, he investigated further into the underground tunnel running along the street. How many more victims could there be? The woman he'd released had said others. How many others might the perp have stuck down there?

Signaling to John, Sal, and the women to keep silent, he moved down the narrow passage. Another woman, then another, sat duct taped to ladders. Seven women in all. Each under her own personal manhole, individually wrapped and attached firmly to a ladder.

My God. What's going on here?

"I'll get you all out of here. Help is on the way." He turned and moved back toward John and the first woman. "What's your name?"

"Jeni. Please, get the rest of this tape off me." She pleaded with her sparkling, mesmerizing eyes.

Nick touched Jeni's cheek with the back of his hand. "I will. Believe me. Let me check out the other women first." He swung toward the other victims and patted each one on the head, consoling them as he passed. "We'll all be out of here in a few minutes. I promise. Don't worry." The first three captives closest to Jeni remained conscious. Nick checked them for major injuries. Their condition was the same as Jeni's, except maybe they'd been there longer.

The three captives furthest away from Jeni were unconscious. Not a good sign. He checked them for a pulse. The first two had weak vital signs. The last had none. He shook his head at John, who'd rounded the corner so he could see both Nick and Jeni. Nick didn't want to let the others know of the deceased. He didn't need them panicking and hysterical because they'd been stuck down there with a corpse.

He kept his voice low as he locked eyes with Johns. "We need to get them out of here and get them medical attention. Those who are unconscious might die from dehydration and starvation. Time is of the essence."

The conscious victims, with the exception of Jeni, ceased struggling to hold back their tears. They sobbed with obvious relief as he passed them. They'd all been saved from certain death. The women were obviously aware of that fact. The sirens grew louder. Nick bet they'd never been so happy to hear an emergency vehicle in all their lives. He couldn't blame them. He was pretty ecstatic about it himself.

John started releasing the other women with his own knife. Nick returned to the task of releasing Jeni, cutting the restraints from her hands and feet. He glanced up when approaching footsteps sounded on the surface of the sidewalk overhead.

Sal directed them to the hole, and Nick let his fellow officers in on his status. "Down here. Get down here fast.

There are seven women total. All tied to manhole ladders. Call for more ambulances and more backup. Now."

Nick described the situation with precision, leaving out the fact one woman had already expired. The EMTs entered the hole and got to work, spreading out and freeing the other women. Nick dealt with Jeni. He made her his sole responsibility.

Within a short time, all the women were released and on their way to the hospital in ambulances, except Jeni. She stood by his car. "You'll be going with me. I'll take you to the hospital."

She hadn't said much since she'd climbed out of the hole. He didn't blame her. She was probably in shock. She wrapped the blanket Nick had given her from his trunk tighter around herself. "I don't think that's necessary. I'm fine. I want to go home."

"I'll take you home after I take you to the hospital." Nick tugged the blanket up over her shoulders. It'd slipped. The June breeze had a nip to it tonight.

John and Sal exchanged a glance, and John caught Nick's attention with an elbow to his ribs. "Do you think that's wise, Nick?"

"I'm a cop. She's in my custody. This'll be my case. I have questions. I need answers. Period."

John threw up his hands. "Fine. Hey, Sal, bet I can guess who gets shotgun."

Nick turned to Jeni. "You want to sit in the car while I talk to the investigating team?"

"No. I want to stand right here for now."

Nick nodded and moved away to make sure everything went smoothly. They better not botch this CSI. He wanted every piece of evidence, every photo, every forensic file on his desk ASAP, and he made that clear to every man and woman working the scene, all while keeping an eye on Jeni.

He wasn't willing to let her out of his sight. He told himself it was only because she obviously hadn't been down there all that long, and she'd be able to help him the most with any questions he had. Nick vowed his desire to be with her had nothing to do with the fact she was so alluring it made his head swim, and she smelled so good and felt so soft and...

Stop it. Get back to work.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Five

Jeni had never seen the moon so beautiful and full. If she had, it'd never meant so much. Total darkness had been the pits.

Officer Tarentino's intense gaze held hers. "Are you okay? What did the medic say? I noticed he checked you out while I dealt with things."

"My brain wants out of my head, stars dancing behind my lids when I close them, and someone's playing the mamba in there. That's the exact medical diagnosis."

"I imagine, but at least you haven't lost your sense of humor. Do the EMTs think it's bad enough to be a concussion?" Tarentino gave a lopsided grin. Sexy. Jeni diverted her gaze from his penetrating one. She didn't have time for sexy.

"No, but they can't tell for sure. Vital signs say I'm fine, though, so I want to go home, not the hospital, and I never want to be that closed off from the outside world again. I'm not claustrophobic, but that's the suckiest experience I've ever had."

"Ranks right up there with some of my worst, too." Nick stared off into space. Jeni bet he'd seen worse, judging by the hard look in his dark brown eyes.

She looked around. Police officers milled around, doing their jobs, as did EMTs. A female officer lingered nearby, glaring at her every now and then with a look of distaste that sent an icy chill up her stiff spine. The unkind stares the female officer hurled in Jeni's direction slammed into her like poisonous darts since the tough-looking female arrived on the scene. If looks could kill like daggers, she'd be in danger of losing her life, again.

Tall and thin, the lady cop looked butch, or maybe she gave the impression of a tough, no-nonsense demeanor because she had to, in order do her job well and not be pushed around in a man's world.

Her skimpy dress didn't do much to protect her from the elements, and the slight breeze she'd so enjoyed a few hours ago in the parking lot now blew a bit too chilly for comfort.

Nick touched her wrist. "Excuse me. I need to wrap this up and get you downtown."

Jeni nodded and rubbed her wrist as he quickly strode away at. The skin tingled from the memory of his caress. She drew in a breath and straightened. She'd had a dreamy moment. She couldn't afford dreamy moments.

She'd never been dumped in the middle of a crime scene before, but if all cops were as thorough as Officer Tarentino, all crimes should be solved. He was everywhere, moving in and out of the mass of vehicles and yellow tape. He exuded competence.

Jeni took a fortifying breath. Good. Maybe he'd catch the jerk who'd shoved her in a hole and gave her a massive headache. She touched her temple. The aspirin the medic gave her hadn't alleviated the dull throb. When would the pain go away? Did she have a concussion? She hoped not. It'd slow her down. She had no time to waste. Officer Tarentino waved in the direction of the strange female officer, and both headed straight for Jeni. Why did he have to bring her over here? She didn't mind him being close. She should, but she didn't. The female, though. She gave Jeni the willies even from this distance.

Nick leaned against the car close enough Jeni could smell him, almost touching. He mimicked her stance, hooking one foot over the other. Was he as relaxed as he looked? She wanted to scream, and he acted like this occurred everyday. She glanced around. Maybe it did to him, but not to her.

Tarentino must've sensed her anxiety. He crossed his arms, reached through the crook of his own, touched her elbow and held it. Jeni stilled. A cop who could be discreet and kind, tell his brothers off, move with precision and purpose, and make her shiver with a slight caress of his thumb on her skin? Pretty damn potent. He could mess up her plans if she let him.

His reassurance took a nosedive when he introduced her to the very officer making her feel decidedly *unsafe*. "Jeni, this is my partner, Officer Victoria Martinelli. Vick, this is Jeni Campanelli."

"Campanelli?" Martinelli repeated Jeni's surname. The woman looked like she wanted to strike venom into Jeni's veins. Martinelli gave a curt nod. "You're Italian?"

"My father was. Sicilian." Why did the woman remind her of a predatory reptile about to swallow its prey whole?

"You're damn lucky Nick got here in time to get you out alive." The poisonous tone of the woman's husky voice fell short of convincing Jeni she was lucky. "Unlike the last woman we pulled out of there. Deader than a door knob."

Jeni gasped. Nick bristled at her side. "Keep your mouth shut about the condition of the other women, Vick."

Vick kicked at a loose bit of concrete and stared at the ground. "Whatever. It's the truth."

"Yeah, well, it's confidential, and the truth can hurt. These ladies will have a hard enough time living through the nightmare they experienced and dealing with the aftermath. I withheld the conditions of the other victims for a reason, and you damn well know it."

Vick glared at him, then at Jeni. "It's better to tell them how damn lucky they are. Maybe they'll pay attention and not get their heads bashed in next time."

Nick unhooked one foot from the other, stretched to his full height, and shifted a bit, looming over Martinelli and blocking Jeni partially from her view. The move had Jeni forcing back a grin. She didn't like this woman. Martinelli didn't act very cop-like, or protect-and-serve-ish.

Nick kept his arms crossed like a massive barrier, and his wide shoulders and back were like a brick wall. His deep, low voice sent a shudder through Jeni's body. "I didn't want to worry them or force them to think of the morbidity of the situation. They were stuck underground, as if buried alive, with a dead body. I knew that would bother the survivors, and so did you. Why do you have to be so damn blunt and crude?"

"Just how I am, I guess." Vick shrugged, narrowed her beady, sparking, blue-fire eyes, and tossed her head, as if her chopped-off bleached-blonde hair would move with the gesture. "How sweet of you, Nick, and considerate, to fret over the girls so." Vick's expression changed to one of pure hunger.

Jeni's gaze dropped to where Officer Martinelli placed her hand on Tarentino's arm as she leaned into him. Martinelli sported blood-red nails the length and sharpness of razor blades. Those suckers could do some serious damage. Martinelli's features and her smooth, seductive moves were a thing of practiced beauty and grace, and they screamed danger to a man's soul. The woman was nauseating, pulling that crap at a time like this. How unprofessional.

Jeni wished she could see Tarentino's expression, but his stiff spine spoke volumes. She almost smiled when Nick stiffened at Martinelli's intimate touch. There might be more to this partnership than police work where Martinelli was concerned, but Tarentino acted less than impressed.

"When do you want to start the paperwork, Partner?" Martinelli's face was inches from Nick's.

"I'm on vacation, Vick, remember?" Nick sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I guess I'm not, anymore. Can't afford the luxury. You start the paperwork tonight. I'll come in tomorrow and take myself off leave. We can work the interviews of the victims together. Right now, I'm taking Jeni to the hospital to get her checked out, just in case." Nick shifted his feet, widened the distance from Martinelli, and edged closer to Jeni.

Jeni stepped to his side. Martinelli dropped her hand from Nick's arm and trudged by Jeni, bumping up against her and not even bothering to apologize. Jeni twisted her face and sniffed the air, probing her memory for the identity of the scent storming into her senses and sending a message to her brain. Had her mother worn that brand of perfume? Did Coni or Laura? She didn't wear perfume, but that scent stuck in her psyche somewhere.

Nick turned to look at her then stared after Martinelli before facing Jeni again. "What? What's wrong?"

"I don't know. It's her perfume. Something strange about it." Jeni wrinkled her nose. Unable to find a comparison to the odor in her brain cells, she shrugged off the curiosity. The woman's choice of body spray didn't matter. "Do we have to go to the hospital? I really do think I'm fine."

"Yes. Just in case. I'd feel better if you saw a doctor. A woman fell at a ski resort last winter and refused medical care, and she died that night from swelling and hemorrhaging. So, you'll go. I won't risk your health."

Jeni heaved a sigh and put her hands up to hold him at bay. "Fine. I got it. Could be deadly. I remember the ski accident. You convinced me."

Jeni acknowledged a shred of disappointment winding through her. She wished she had someone to care about her other than in a professional capacity. She shook her head at her silly urge, trying to step back from the strange feelings bugging her since the first contact with Tarentino and his scent and touch in that hole. Was she crazy? Had that hit over her head done damage to her brain? She didn't want him, or any man, to care for her. Not yet. Did she?

* * * *

Holding Jeni's arm in case of an unexpected dizzy spell, Nick helped her to his car. John and Sal had helped with the scene where they could, but mostly they'd stood back and kept Jeni company. At least they'd been civil and kept their personal opinions to themselves in front of her, he hoped.

Now they plopped in the backseat of his car and slammed the doors closed. They didn't approve of his choice to drive Jeni around. He didn't need their approval. He was within limits of his professional role as protector and homicide investigation expert. His boss would approve. His brothers' annoyance had nothing to do with his job and everything to do with the fact he'd latched onto a woman who needed help.

So he hadn't solved his problem tonight and let go of Isabella. So what? It wasn't his fault he'd literally stumbled over a bunch of buried women and aided in their rescue, but in his book, this was the best thing for him. His brothers wanted him to let go of his fury and start to heal. This was the only thing keeping him sane. Helping others. Why didn't they get that?

Jeni winced. Nick stopped before opening the passenger door. "Pretty sore and stiff from being restrained?"

She nodded. The need to protect her thrummed through him now as strongly as it had when he'd first found her. He opened the door and held her elbow as she lowered herself into the seat. He closed the door and kept an eye on his brothers through the windshield as he jogged around to the driver's side. He didn't want them convincing her to ride in an ambulance at this stage in the game. As soon as he started the engine, he faced her. "Not to scare you witless, but your abductor is out there somewhere and quite possibly knows who you are and where to find you. He might already be aware you and the others have been saved."

Jeni sucked in a breath and laid her hand on her chest. "How?"

Nick nodded at the camera crew funneling through the small crowd. Even at 3:00 a.m., the vultures swipe down on chaos. For two hours, he'd worked the scene. Now he had to leave it to the rest of the officers and hope they found enough evidence to give them a lead, and he prayed the media didn't mess the case up.

He swung his eyes back to hers. She gaped at him and swallowed hard. He wanted to hurt the guy who'd done this, maybe even maim him. Better yet, kill him. "Your release will make the perp angry, and he could come after all of you, again. Fanatical criminals who commit sadistic crimes like this don't exactly take kindly to being out-smarted. Not that I outsmarted anyone. I got lucky." He tilted his head toward his brothers. "We got lucky."

Jeni swallowed hard and leaned her head against the high seatback. An overpowering need to keep Jeni safe swirled through him and landed in his gut like a ton of bricks, followed by a heavy dose of guilt mixed with a pang of regret and loss. He couldn't take his eyes off Jeni's gorgeous body and flashing eyes, but he'd come here to contemplate the loss of his fiancée at this very spot, and he'd forgotten about her during the chaos of the fortuitous rescue of the beauty next to him.

John cleared his throat. "You know who these women are, right?"

Nick nodded, and Sal leaned forward. "The six missing women the whole media's buzzed about for days."

Nick put the car in gear. "It isn't six, anymore."

Sal leaned back. "Jeni's family probably isn't aware she's been abducted."

Jeni shifted so she could glance at all of them. "Could you people stop talking about me as if I'm not here?"

John patted the arm she rested on the center console. "Sorry. We're brothers, so we like to hash things out and discuss the news. Our wives hate it when we leave them out, but it's a hard habit to break. I'm a fireman, so I do a lot of arson investigating, Sal's a lawyer, so he sees it all, and Nick's a cop, so you know he's in the thick of things. The press have been having a field day with this one."

Jeni nodded and pushed the hair back from her face. Nick was glad. He'd been itching to tuck the stray strand of pitch black behind her tiny ear for several minutes. She tossed the rest of her long mane behind her shoulder and stared out the windshield. "I've only been in the manhole for a short time, but my parents wouldn't miss me."

They stared at her. What could they ask without being nosy? Nick took the leap. He was the investigating officer. He could make the question look like a dig for motive through personal history. Maybe she'd known her kidnapper. "Missing persons wouldn't have contacted them so soon. Is that what you mean?"

"Don't play dumb. Ask me." She rolled her eyes.

"Fine. Why wouldn't your parents miss you?"

"They're dead. Have been for years."

Nick narrowed his eyes. "Let's go. Hospital first then the precinct."

"My parents have nothing to do with this."

"Probably not, but you'd be surprised how things come full circle after years of thinking things are over and done with." Nick pulled away from the curb.

John coughed and leaned forward. "How did your parents die?"

Nick glanced at him in the mirror and suppressed a growl of irritation. "Can't we save this for the office? I'd like to take notes and record the interview."

John shrugged. "Just curious."

Jeni rubbed her temples. "Car accident. Big one. Twenty car pile up. Few years back. Hwy 270."

John shifted. "I remember that one. Took several crews of firemen, police officers, and volunteers hours to get the victims dug out of that mess and ... sorry. I doubt you want to talk about it."

Jeni's knuckles turned white as she gripped them together in her lap. Her face drained to the same shade. Nick wanted to flog John. "Save it for the station."

He drove toward the hospital. Jeni turned to him and nailed him with a question he didn't want to answer. "They suspect a serial killer, don't they?" "The case hadn't been turned over to my department, homicide. Girls disappeared, but no bodies turned up until now. Technically, missing persons aren't proclaimed dead until a body is discovered. Now they have six live bodies and one dead one."

Jeni gripped the edge of the seat next to him. "The killer's been stopped, thanks to you. Most of the women aren't dead. They've been rescued."

He gulped down the lump in his throat and tried to install some saliva into his cotton-dry mouth. She looked at him like he was some kind hero in a fairytale storybook. He wasn't. Not at all. Far from it. He sought revenge.

Sal placed a hand on his shoulder. "Better to stop the killings before they happen, instead of having to find the killer after it's too late for the victims."

Regret set in, but Nick willed it away. He couldn't bring back the dead victim in the hole any more than he could bring back Isabella. "If only we'd gotten there in time to save them all."

Jeni reached over and touched his arm. His heart pounded without mercy at the gentle contact. "No use dwelling on the death and loss of the woman you couldn't get there in time to save. It's not your fault. You're not the bad guy here."

Nick flinched but resisted the urge to jerk his arm from her tender grasp. Contact meant consoling. He didn't want to be consoled. He wanted to breathe fire. "The SOB got away, for now, but I'll do everything in my power to find him." For Isabella, Jeni, and the other women he'd pulled out of the sewer in the middle of the city tonight, he'd do what he could to find the perp and put him behind bars.

John glanced at Nick in the mirror. "When we get to the hospital, I'll find out the conditions of the victims. Nurse Karen is probably on duty, and she'll let me know when you'll be able to interview them."

Nick nodded. "Tomorrow will be a long day of questions, and hopefully, answers." He scowled. "My so-called vacation has come to an abrupt halt. I have more important things to do now. No rest for the weary."

No time for loitering if he wanted to fulfill his pledge to Isabella, Jeni and the other abducted women.

Jeni smiled. "I'd put my money on the fact you'll catch the creep."

Nick blanched. How could she have such blind faith in him? She'd just met him. "Since we found you so soon after your abduction, the path to the perp won't be so cold. Maybe I can find the slime quickly."

Jeni nodded. "I'm sure you can."

She brushed her fingers over his forearm again. What was it about her and touching? Was she one of those women who had no concern for his personal bubble? His skin crawled and went taut with her warm touch, but Nick worked his jaw and wished she'd stopped pawing at him like that. It made him want to paw at her right back. He didn't need the distraction or the attraction. He had things to do.

Nick pulled into the hospital parking lot. "Wait a minute. I'll come around. I don't want you falling if you're still sore."

Jeni removed her hand from the door handle and dropped it in her lap. He got out and jogged around the front of the vehicle, his brothers exiting on each side. He'd swear they had grins on the silly faces.

John and Sal entered the emergency sliding glass doors ahead of Nick and Jeni and made a bee line for Karen, the head nurse on shift. Nick, Sal, and John spent a lot of time here. Being friends with the head nurse was a serious advantage in their line of work.

Nick checked Jeni into emergency, flashing his badge and hoping that'd get them past triage a bit ahead of most of the sick and hurt in the waiting room. Not fair? Maybe not, but this was important to more than a few people. This could mean life or death for several victims. "If it weren't for that bump on your head, we wouldn't have to sit here for what might be hours, but I want to have you looked at by a doctor, just in case."

"I'd rather go home."

"I know, but I felt the lump on your head, and so did the medics, and so did you. Concussions are nothing to mess with. They can be serious business. I'd rather not tempt fate and risk you having a major injury." He grinned and winked then stopped and stared at her. Where had that come from? Had he flirted with her? He clenched his fist before he did something stupid like reach out and hold the hand she gripped the chair arm with. "Wouldn't want a memory loss. We need you at your best." She sighed and acquiesced, closing her eyes and slumping down in her chair so her head rested on the back of the plastic seat. "Fine."

"The paramedics from the ambulances of the remaining two unconscious women just came through the door."

She smiled. "I see, and your brothers are good. They saw them, too, and they dove like buzzards on raw meat."

Nick slumped so he'd be on her level. "My brothers are nothing if not tenacious. By the time you make it through triage and insurance formalities, they'll know as much as there is to know about every one of those women with you tonight."

She pushed back up and slumped her shoulders forward. Nick held back a chuckle.

John drifted in their direction. "The two unconscious women are hanging in there, but they remain in very serious, even critical, condition. They might not make it."

"Jeni Campanelli?" The nurse called, and Jeni stood and dragged her feet on the way to triage. Nick wanted to follow her, but he didn't know her well enough to hear her personal business during a physical interview, so he stood there like a puppy waiting for his master to return. What a sot.

"We'll be here for awhile. There's a line." Sal dropped in the seat next to where Nick paced. "Might as well sit and stop all that pacing."

"Right." Nick wanted to punch someone. Not Sal or John. If not for their idea of how to cure his depression, they wouldn't have found Jeni and the others. But he wanted to hurt someone. He wanted to take out a bit of anger on some criminal. Didn't they deserve it?

Nick paced a couple of trips around the waiting room, stared at the TV a minute, then slumped into the chair between John and Sal. Brotherhood. Couldn't beat it, even if they did bug him about his nonexistent healing process.

John nudged Nick, elbow to elbow. "Well, what do you think? Was it 'just dumb luck' that we found those women tonight, like you told Melissa?"

Sal joined the chorus of pestering Nick. "Might've been something more that aided us in finding them?"

Nick gave up. "Might have been fate? A gift from God? He works in mysterious ways, you know?"

"Well, you have to heal sometime. Maybe this is God's way of pushing you in that direction. Maybe it's time."

"Or maybe God is helping get revenge against some of the wickedness in the world. It's not always about turning the other cheek. Sometimes it's about an eye for an eye."

John and Sal shook their heads. John patted his back. "You're a lost cause, bro."

"Maybe, but I'll track down the abductor and make sure the nasty perv never does this to anyone else again."

How would he do that? He didn't know, but hopefully that question would be answered soon, and the jerk would get what he so justly deserved, and so would Nick, and Isabella, and Jeni and the others. Justice.

"Jeni's the key. She has to be. She's the latest victim. She'll help me solve this case." "And that'll bring you one step closer to easing your guilt and redeeming your loss, right?"

Nick looked John square in the eye. "Right."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Six

The interminable wait at the hospital had Nick biting his nails to the quick, but John and Sal chatted with the nurses as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred during the past wee hours of the morning.

Nick's patience wore paper thin. He had questions to ask Jeni and the other survivors. Lots of them. Some professional, some personal. They all had to wait. Jeni had been taken straight from triage to the examination room, and he hadn't had a chance to speak with her for two hours.

Five a.m. after a very long night was not the time to mess with Nick. He was grumpy. According to his brothers and other family members courageous enough to test him, he'd been grumpy for a year.

Speaking of John and Sal, they wandered over and looked down at him. John stuck his hands in his pockets. "Lori and Sherri are on their way to pick us up. Is that okay? Do you have this covered? You will go home and get some rest soon, right?"

Nick rubbed at his dry eyes. "Yeah. Jeni will be too tired and too traumatized to endure a grilling from me, and I'll be too tired to do the grilling." He stood. "I'll find out if she'll be safe for the night, how she plans to get home, and if she has security, an alarm, something."

Sal placed a hand on his shoulder. "Fine, but then get some rest. Exhaustion will slow up your thinking skills and

mess you up when you try to sort through everything tomorrow."

"I know. Thanks, guys."

John and Sal gave him a brotherly punch on each arm then left to wait outside for their wives. Nick wouldn't leave Jeni high and dry. He'd make sure her house was secure then he'd wait it out. It was the least he could do. He'd been the one to insist on the hospital tests. She probably regretted listening to him by now. Too bad. Safety and health, first. Sleep, later.

Nick cringed. An inkling of some odd sentiment inched its way through him. Did she have someone to go home to? A husband or a boyfriend? He'd seen no wedding ring, but other than the brief conversation in the car on a too personal level with his brothers, he hadn't asked any questions about her life. He'd wanted to save the inquisition for the station.

Still, he'd checked for a ring out of curiosity, telling himself her marital status was something he needed to know. A significant other might have a motive to kidnap her and shove her in a hole. You never knew with domestics. Lovers did crazy, far out things, like cover up the murder of wives and girlfriends or people they stalked by killing several others in the process. He'd heard of stranger things. He'd seen for himself that truth was stranger than fiction.

Anyway, the lack of a ring was something any observant cop would notice. Nick scowled. It was more than that. He'd hoped she was single, and he didn't want to think too deeply about why her marital status mattered to him. He certainly wasn't ready yet to give his heart away. He wasn't sure he even had a heart anymore, except when it ached with loneliness, guilt and despair.

Nick sighed, eyeing the door Jeni would come through. Each time he'd neared Jeni tonight his heart pounded for more than one reason. He'd felt guilty, but he'd also responded to her, physically and emotionally, even if he didn't understand why. Each time he'd gotten close to her, he'd hardened in an instant. Adrenaline had raced through his veins, causing his blood to thicken and his breath to catch. He'd ached with want of her. Hell, he ached even now.

It must be lust, combined with the fact he hadn't been with a woman in over a year.

Nick shoved himself off the uncomfortable waiting room seat. Maybe he'd feel better pacing. Maybe not. His shoes squeaked against the linoleum tile. Wearing a hole in the floor didn't stop him from contemplating his enraging past, his confounding present, and his uncertain future.

Isabella had finally convinced Nick to marry her. He'd tried to resist her. He'd told her his job would cause her misery and danger and loneliness, considering the ridiculous amount of hours he worked.

Look where her proposal had gotten them. He'd agreed to marry her, and she'd died, but her death had nothing to do with his job or the freaks he locked away on a daily basis.

Nick plopped back down on the hard, gray chair. Even the color of the damn chair depressed him. Isabella was gone, and Nick had been left a shell of a man. He had no real life. He lived a mere existence, going through the motions, doing his duty. Nick surged to his feet, heading for the drinking fountain. He wished he didn't miss Isabella and her memory didn't haunt him. A part of him had been ripped to pieces, stolen from him. Now he was being torn to shreds again because he felt guilty about the new feelings stirring within him.

Beneath it all was what really worried him: a thin thread of hope. Maybe he could be happy and whole again, someday. Jeni made him feel alive again. She made his blood stir, but once he opened his heart again, it could be sliced to pieces. He didn't know if he was ready for that kind of sting. Time might heal all wounds, as his friends and family had all been trying to tell him, but how much time would it take to get Isabella's death, and his guilt, out of his system and off his blood-drenched conscience?

At 5:30 a.m., Jeni was released. She came sauntering towards him looking better and fresher than anyone had a right to at such an ungodly hour in the morning and after being kidnapped. She'd been cleaned up, and color had returned to her face. Man, she was a knock-out. Nick gawked at her, all of her. He couldn't tear his eyes away. His pulse quickened, his mouth went dry, and he swallowed hard.

Jeni glided toward him. She was young, maybe midtwenties, and she was petite, with a dark complexion, velvety smooth skin and full, pouty lips. Her shiny black eyes captured and held his, and a tingling sensation ran through his entire body.

Underlying her nonchalance was a definite case of nerves, though. She fidgeted with her hands.

Nick stood and met her halfway, as if compelled to close the distance between them. He glanced away, trying hard to hide the fact he grew aroused just looking at her. "How are you?"

"Except for a few bumps and bruises, plus a minor concussion, the doc seems to think I'm fine," she drawled with a husky voice and a crooked smile. She looked up at him, the uplift of her long, full lashes revealing a glint of humor in her terrific eyes.

Fine? Nick went numb. Erotic described her with greater accuracy. He drew his brows together. "It's nice you can smile at a time like this, but you do realize what you've been through and what could've happened to you, don't you? You're aware you're probably in danger, right? Does that register with you?"

Jeni rolled her eyes. "I'm sure I know all that. I'm not stupid, but I'm alive, and I know that, too. I'm glad you were there to drag me out of that tomb, and I see no reason to dwell on morbidity."

Nick shook his head, cleared his throat, and tried to act as casual as Jeni. "Can your husband come get you?"

Jeni looked away. The smile disappeared from her captivating face. Nick missed the glint of humor and warmth in her fabulous eyes. She refused to make eye contact. "I'm not married."

"Anyone else to come for you? Boyfriend? Siblings? Friends?" *Yeah, like that didn't sound obvious*.

"None of the above." A look of sadness crossed her features, and she gazed with distraction at her small hands, which she'd begun to wring in front of her in an obvious, jittery fashion.

"What do you mean? No one can come get you? Is everyone inconveniently out of town, or what? I know it's ridiculously early, but surely your family or friends wouldn't mind coming to get you?" Nick's tone was probably a little too harsh, but he was angry over the fact she thought no one cared enough about her to help her out after such a lifethreatening ordeal.

She glanced at him before her eyes darted away. "I'm not married. I have no boyfriend." She lifted her chin and jutted it out, as if she didn't give a damn what he thought of her chosen lifestyle. She took a deep breath. "I was an only child, so there are no siblings. I have friends, but I don't want to bother them. I'll call a cab. You can call me when you need to talk to me tomorrow about the case."

She started to go around him to the payphone, and he grabbed her arm. Electricity sizzled upon contact. Sparks flew through the static-charged air. He jumped and almost yelped. She jerked her hand away and winced. She obviously wanted to have nothing to do with him, certainly no physical contact. She swiped at her arm where he'd touched her, like she rubbed a disease from her skin.

Heat lingered at the point of contact. He hardened with amazing speed and intensity. The unexpected impact of her sensual effect on him hammered into his lungs and took his breath away. Things grew worse by the minute, but he couldn't let her go home alone. The creep that'd kidnapped her might want to finish what he'd started. "You misunderstood me. It's no bother. I'll take you home and set up a stake-out in your driveway. I'll stay in my car and sleep a few hours until you feel like going to the station and answering questions. I'm not letting you be alone until I know it's safe." Nick turned to safe mode, professional police officer persona, for his own good, and hers.

Jeni nodded in cool agreement, which was a definite plus. She had little choice in deciding if it was a good idea to have police protection at this point. Nick wanted to stake out her property for more than one reason: her protection, his peace of mind, and the off chance the perp might drive by her place and try again. Nick wanted to nail the brute.

"It's 5:30 in the morning. I need answers, but we both need rest. I can help Vick write up the report this afternoon and try to figure this out. For now, let's get you home. Okay?"

Jeni nodded and followed him. She must've figured it was futile to argue. He'd reverted to commanding police officer mode, and not many people argued with him when he put on his game face. Surely, she agreed with him about one thing. She was tired, and they'd have a long day tomorrow, filled with tiresome questions and hopefully plenty of helpful answers.

"Where are you brothers?"

"They went home with their wives a little while ago."

They headed out the door of the emergency room. He'd assumed she'd only been kidnapped hours before he'd found her, but had yet to ask for details of what had happened to her. She could put it in the report, but she still smelled of her perfume, and not so much like the hole she'd been dumped in, as the other women did, all stale and unclean.

Nick smiled as they started down the steps of the police department toward his car. "It's Friday night, actually right now it's Saturday morning, early, very early. How long do you think you were down there in that hole before I found you?"

Jeni blinked and stared at him then she looked away. "What time did you find me?"

"About 1:15 a.m." Nick maintained a grim set of his jaw, not mentioning the fact he'd been thinking of his dead fiancée at the time.

Jeni twisted her face into a quizzical expression and measured him. Was she trying to read his mind, or wondering what the heck he'd been doing out there in the middle of no man's land so late? Any normal person would ponder that.

"I got lucky. I was only there a few hours. I left *Carpathia* at about 10:30 p.m. Friday evening, last night."

That brought Nick up short. He stopped and stared at her in disbelief. Jeni gazed into his eyes, probably searching for answers and wondering what she'd said to make him react this way. Nick was stunned speechless. He couldn't move, couldn't focus, couldn't even breathe. He tried to speak, to ask her if he'd heard her right, but he knew he had. His voice failed him. *Carpathia?* It couldn't be happening again, could it? First Isabella, now...

A fresh swirl of sadness, guilt and nausea rushed through him. All the air fled from his lungs in a gush. Isabella had died leaving *Carpathia*. Jeni had been abducted leaving the club. *Sick irony.* Why was he being tortured this way? What had she and these other innocent women done to deserve this?

Jeni put her hand on his arm, sending warning bells off in his hammering head and zapping him back to his senses, back to reality, back to the present. The heat from her soft touch burned him to his soul. "Are you all right? You look frightful, like you've seen a ghost, or something."

That did it. Minutes before he'd found Jeni, he'd been wondering if Isabella might show up, materialize in front of him in some way, like a ghost, and help him solve her own murder. This was getting spookier by the minute. The ironies, and coincidences, stacked up, and they were more than he could handle.

He turned and bolted back up the few steps they'd descended, heading for the men's room inside the door of the emergency room, hoping he'd make it to the sink before the wave of nausea that'd hit him so swiftly, engulfing him, taking his breath away, took its inevitable toll.

Frantic, he threw water on his face, shaking and out of control. He stared at his pale reflection in the mirror. All the blood had drained from his face, and he was white as a sheet. He couldn't stop trembling, and his breath came in short spurts, forcing him to gasp for air.

He slammed his open palm against the wall. He had to get this crushing sense of guilt and irony out of his system. Life dealt him a tough hand. So what? He needed to get a grip.

He leaned against the sink and took several deep gulps of life-sustaining oxygen. Once his body, especially his churning

stomach, was under control enough to take Jeni home, he fled the bathroom, hating his weakness.

It was best to go back to safe mode and act like what he was, a trained professional, a hard core police officer, instead of the way he'd been acting, like a heart-broken, sex-starved maniac.

* * * *

Jeni started up the steps then sidestepped Nick as he flew out of the bathroom, red-faced, and barreled through the double glass emergency room doors like a battering ram, without even so much as a backward glance in her direction.

Nick swerved around her. "Let's go. Andiamo."

Jeni struggled to keep pace with his long stride. What'd caused him such frustration? What'd set him off? What had she said to upset him so and make him come unglued?

Nick held the door to her side of the car open. She got in, and he slammed it shut. She jumped at the violence of his demeanor. He spun around the front of the vehicle and dove inside. He slammed his own door and turned the key, the engine igniting and the starter grinding when Nick held the key a little too long. "Which way?"

She gave him general directions, and he drove toward the exit ramp to the highway. What had she done to bring on Nick's wrath and the silent treatment she was now being graced with? She resented the way he'd clammed up, ignoring her. She hadn't meant to hurt him. After all, *she* was the one who'd been through hell tonight, and she was the one that'd been kidnapped, and shoved in a hole, and left to die. Jeni shivered.

Jeni crossed her arms over her chest. She wasn't sure what to make of Nick and his abrupt mood swings and brooding. One minute, he looked at her as if he might devour her whole, making her fidget in self-consciousness. Then, all of sudden, he'd transformed into a wounded animal, looking like he might pass out right there in front of her. Then, he'd come out of the bathroom, resembling a monster, growling at her in ruthless rage.

His emotions were more volatile at the moment than hers, and *she* was the one who'd been victimized. She had no choice but to go with the flow, which she wasn't used to doing. She was usually in complete control of her own life and took orders from no one. This situation put her at the mercy of a man, a position she never wanted to be in again, not after getting hit over the head with a club and dragged into a cave in the ground, sort of.

It'd be a long ride to where she lived, at least half an hour from the hospital.

Nick spoke, and Jeni jumped. "Why don't you live on *The Hill*?"

Jeni's heartbeat slowed. She considered ignoring his attempt at conversation, but then she thought it might be important to the case. "I wanted to live near the UMSL campus, so I wouldn't have to commute very far to school. Right now, I wish I'd moved to *The Hill*, where so many other Italian-Americans live, even if I did have to commute. I'm sure I'd love it there, and I'd fit in. I grew up in Italy, but when my parents died, I..."

Jeni gulped and bit back the burning tears threatening to escape her tightening throat and burning eye lids. No, she refused to mourn for them in that way. They wouldn't want her to. They lived every moment to the fullest. They'd told her to be like Peter Pan and never grow up. She hadn't listened. She'd wanted to be better than them, but she wasn't. Maybe they were right. Maybe she should have some fun and live a little and not be such a stick in the mud. Look where it'd gotten her, after all. She'd left a club of partiers and gotten knocked out cold by a serial killer.

Nick reached over and touched her hand. So he wasn't that mad, after all. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. You're tired. I won't make you think about this stuff until tomorrow."

Jeni rubbed her wet eyes. "No, I'm sorry. I don't need to unload on you. You saved my life. I'm so exhausted. I don't need this crap."

Nick drew his hand away. "It's okay. It'll be better after we get some rest. Try to relax."

Jeni closed her eyes. Her emotions were so jumbled. If she were able to think straight, she wouldn't be chasing thoughts about her parents and her choices.

Then there was Officer Tarentino. He was supposed to be helping her and finding her kidnapper, and all he knew about her so far was her name, that she'd been at *Carpathia* tonight, and where she didn't live and why she didn't live there. She wanted to tell him more, and he seemed to want to know more, but they were so out of it, they kept butting heads. Plus, after she'd mentioned *Carpathia*, he'd looked like he'd seen a ghost, and he'd freaked out and turned white as a ghost himself. He planned to do the questioning tomorrow. Tonight was probably only about conversation, but maybe not. She couldn't quite figure him out.

She drew her brows together and stared out the passenger window. What the hell could his drastic change in attitude mean? What was he hiding? Did it have anything to do with her, or why he'd been in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night?

Jeni leaned her head against the back of the seat. It didn't matter. She didn't want him upset, but she couldn't quite say she was sorry he'd been out there tonight. Whatever the reason, however odd his actions, she wasn't to blame for any of it.

Thank God he found me and the others. Thank God... And then she dozed.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Seven

Out of the corner of his eye, Nick examined Jeni's profile. She sat with her mesmerizing eyes closed. He'd hurt her feelings. He'd been unreasonable. None of this was her fault. Jeni didn't even know about Isabella, and he'd snapped at Jeni and treated her with the rudeness of a grizzly yanked out of hibernation mid-winter.

He should apologize. He opened his mouth to do just that, and she dropped her hands to her lap and crossed her legs toward him. The movement gave Nick a full shot of her shapely legs and the smooth skin of her upper thighs. *Damn short, slip of a dress*.

Nick remembered the feel and smell of Jeni when he'd held her. Her essence had assailed his senses and blindsided him. He gripped the steering wheel tighter. His fingers turned white, and the nerve endings stung as if they were on fire. He'd had about all he could take for one night, and this wasn't helping. He tried not to look her way, pretending to concentrate on his driving.

He needed a distraction, and he couldn't resist asking what he wanted to know most. "Why were you at *Carpathia*?"

Jeni's eyes popped open, and her foot kicked the bottom of the dash in front of her. She rubbed the spot where it'd connected with the base of the glove box. "What?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I thought you were resting your eyes." She glanced at him and mumbled before looking out the window. "What did you say? Do you need better directions? We're going the right way."

"I asked why you were at Carpathia."

"Celebrating."

"Celebrating what?" Isabella had been celebrating, too. Some celebration.

Jeni took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders, gripping one with her hand, massaging. She had to be tense. Nick knew how she felt. "I earned my Masters Degree in History at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. I'll start working on my PhD this coming fall at Washington University. Some of my classmates thought it'd be a brilliant idea to go out and blow off some steam. I joined them."

Nick glanced at her. "A PhD candidate? Hanging out at a nightclub like *Carpathia*? Is that your usual hangout?"

"No. Definitely not. But Coni and Laura go there often, so don't underestimate PhDs. It takes all kinds."

Nick wouldn't have expected an intellectual to be quite so beautiful and erotic, either. He needed to go back to talking, instead of letting his overactive libido direct his brain waves. "Aren't most intellectuals geeky and crusty? Don't they wear those BC glasses and plaid golf pants?"

"BC glasses?"

"Birth control glasses. Like the military issues in basic training. They're so ugly they ward off the opposite sex, so they refer to them as BC glasses."

"That's stereotyping, you know." A ghost of a smile graced her kissable lips, and her eyes twinkled. Nick shouldn't have noticed. Since when did he notice? It'd been a year since he thought of such things. Why now? Why her? "Why'd you leave the club so early? Why not party all night long?"

He wasn't being fair or rational, but his temper remained out of control at the moment. She threw a look of disgust and indignation at him and sighed with impatience. That should've made him angrier. Instead, the sound of her heavy breathing had his imagination taking a nosedive for the gutter. He pictured her sighing beneath him, her hot breath against his lips, her hips writhing beneath him, and her hands clinging to him. The imagery sent a jolt of electricity and awareness through him, straight to his groin and left him longing to touch her. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel to keep from doing so. His body ached with an intense need for her ... or maybe just *any* woman.

Nick cringed, but the feeling of guilt didn't burn as intense at this moment. Jeni's lips pouted then a look of anger crossed her face. *She looks so damn kissable. Edible even.*

He shook his head to clear his mind of this ridiculous line of thinking. Appalled at himself, he kept his mouth shut and waited for her answer. When none came, he pushed. "Well, so, you're not a major partier, or what?"

"No, and when this idiot kept asking me to dance and..." She stopped and looked at him as if she didn't want to admit the rest.

"What idiot?"

"Clint. He kept touching me, more than I wanted him to, where I didn't want him to. I told myself and my friends if he pawed me one more time, I was leaving. He did, and I snuck out a side door and headed for my car." She laughed, a nervous tinkling that tore at Nick's heartstrings. "How ironic, huh? I left the club to get a way from one creep and ran straight into another one."

Nick wanted to punch the guy out, but the cop in him wondered if they might already have a suspect. Could it be this easy? Could she identify the creep already? He doubted it, but it was worth a try. "Did he follow you? Could he be our guy?"

"No, I don't think so. I remember thinking how the parking lot was so empty and quiet." She chuckled, pulling Nick's gaze to her delicious looking lips. "One minute I was laying out a plan for the summer to research for my dissertation, contemplating how peaceful it was in the stillness and how good the night breeze felt on my face, and the next thing I knew, I was getting smacked over the head and waking up in a hole."

She pouted again. Her mouth drew him to her like a moth to a flame. He forced himself not to reach out and touch her lips with his fingers, or pull over onto the curb and kiss her senseless.

Was that such a bad idea? Why not make her feel safe? Why not console her? Why not...

Oh, yeah. Because it could lead to things I have no time for and shouldn't be thinking of. That's why, you idiot.

Great. Now he talked to himself and answered. He was in real trouble here. He shook his head in frustration, to clear his thoughts and get his mind off touching her and onto the situation and the case at hand. He needed to get back on track. "So. Why don't you start from the beginning and tell me what happened tonight? I can jot it all down later. Did you see who hit you? Can you describe the guy?"

Jeni shook her head with vigor. "No, I put my key in the lock of my car door, and a reflection flashed in the window. I started to turn when I heard a scrape or a noise, then I felt the impact of something on my head. Then, nothing, until I woke up sore and stiff and scared."

She wrapped her arms around herself and looked right at him then, the remnants of fear and relief in her eyes. The soulful gaze about undid him. Her voice lowered to a whisper, and she trembled. "I thought that was it for me, Nick."

The sound of his name on her lips made his heart pound with wild abandon. One hand on the wheel, he reached out, taking her hand in his and bringing it toward him to rest it on his thigh, linking his fingers in hers.

She should've jumped back, or told him to get away from her. Instead, she turned her hand into his and grabbed onto it as if she were holding on for dear life, clinging to the connection as a lifeline.

He looked into her eyes. Tears glistened, forming behind her long, beautiful lashes. She fought a losing battle. Unwanted tears flowed down her pink cheeks unbidden. He knew it was from sheer exhaustion and relief. She shook like a leaf.

For all her bravery, Jeni had been terrified out of her mind tonight. Anger warred with protectiveness to take the forefront of an emotional power play. He unwound his fingers from hers and jerked his hand away. He gripped the steering wheel with a vengeance.

Jeni hurried to wipe the streaming tears away, using the hand that'd felt so warm on Nick's thigh only a moment before. She looked hurt, rejected, then revolted. She turned her face back toward the window, away from him, shutting him out, as much as possible in the compact interior and close confines of his car.

Nick wished he hadn't been so brusque with her, but he didn't need to dwell on another useless regret. He returned to professionalism. It was safer. He cleared his throat. "What about the reflection? Could you tell how big the kidnapper was? Or make out any of his features? Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

Jeni wiped at her eyes. "No, I only saw a glimpse of him, a shadow."

She sounded wounded. He'd done that to her. "What about the sound? What do you think it was? The scrape?"

She turned back to him and brought her eyebrows together. She took a deep breath as if to steady herself and bring her thoughts back to the case. "I don't know. Maybe a hard-soled shoe on the parking lot pavement, but that wouldn't make sense for someone trying to be sneaky, now would it?"

She was a thinker. Nick had to give her that. She was smart, and she had a sense of humor, even about this.

"What else could the sound have been?" Nick searched his mind for possibilities, even as he asked her the question.

She shrugged. "Maybe what he hit me with. Maybe he pulled it out of a case or something. I don't know. The sound came from that distance, but then again..." She peered sideways at him from under her lashes. "I was hit over the head. I might not be remembering things right. I was knocked senseless. I probably don't know what I'm talking about. It wouldn't be the first time."

Nick looked her right square in the eye. "I doubt you could ever be wrong about any of this. You're a very intelligent and controlled person, and you have an eye for detail."

* * * *

Jeni squirmed as the heat rose in her cheeks. She was embarrassed beyond all reason by Nick's blatant honesty, approving appraisal, and appreciative stare. His dark, stormy eyes drilled right through her, right into the depths of her bared, scarred soul. The effect of his lingering gaze sizzled all the way to her curling toes. She'd never reacted to a man in this way before. She'd never even spent this much time alone with a man before, except in a professional manner. Then again, this was a professional situation, too. It didn't feel like one, though. It felt far too intimate.

Jeni winced. What would a macho, experienced man like Nick do with all those long looks he gave her if he knew how inexperienced she was? She'd barely even been kissed, for gracious sakes, and she'd turned twenty-five on her last birthday. An old maid by most people's standards. A bookworm. No time for men and no time for fun. She had her reasons, and they were valid reasons. *Damn it*. She needed a reality check. She'd managed to remain single and independent all this time—a quarter of a century, mind you—and she wouldn't let Nick, or any other man, mess up her time frame and her plan.

Nick went on with his relentless interrogation. "What do you remember next?"

"Waking up in complete darkness, thinking I was alone and left to die, or worse, the creep might come back and do more than leave me there." She shuddered, staring down at her hands, wringing them in her lap.

Nick trudged on with his ruthless enquiry. "He didn't ... uh...?"

"No." Jeni didn't even want to discuss something so vile. "They examined me for rape at the hospital. Said it was routine in situations like this, in case I was assaulted while unconscious, but I knew he didn't touch me that way."

Nick nodded. He didn't even want to consider the sick son of a bitch touching her, but he needed details to further his investigation. "What do you remember next?"

Jeni looked up at him in adoration, like he was a hero or something. Sheer panic gripped at his chest. Hero worship was the least of what he needed.

"You," she whispered.

It took all Nick's control not to reach for her. He'd hurt her enough for one night. Why couldn't he leave well enough alone and be professional about this? He was getting in way over his head. He'd known her for a few hours, but he was drawn to her like a magnet on a compass pointing north. If he were honest with himself, he knew his feelings weren't just physical.

Nick tried to get his mind off touching her and put some space between them. He leaned against his drive's side car door and focused on their location. "Are we almost there?"

"*Si*. Take the next exit." Jeni directed him the rest of the way to her home.

Nick followed Jeni's directions and pulled into her driveway. The house appeared small but cozy even from the outside, flowers and a landscaped yard he bet she did herself. She took good care of her home, and it suited her.

"I don't want to let you go inside alone. The kidnapper might know you personally. At the very least, he has your identification. No purses or wallets were located at the scene. I'll go in and check the place out. Wait here." Nick ordered her in a crisp manner, determined to keep his professionalism in tact.

He got out of the car and took his flashlight and the key she handed him. He stepped inside her home, hand on his gun. He unsnapped the latch to the holster. Nick let his eyesight adjust, instead of flipping on bright lights and announcing his presence to an intruder.

No sound reached his ears, so he hit the switch and illuminated the front room. He took a quick look around, making personal observations, and professional ones. She lived in comfort but not in excess. Her house looked like a home, filled with homey furniture and lacy décor, all the touches of a woman's tastes and extras most men, including himself, never thought to put in their homes. He did a sweep of the rooms. The house was small, one bedroom, one full bath, one half bath, a living room and a kitchen. The living room was decorated with frilly curtains, all a soft, creamy, off white. Scenic wall hangings adorned her walls, puzzles she'd done herself and had framed. The bedroom was a combination of hunter and pastel greens. The bathroom was decked out in peach and scented with spicy potpourri.

It was all Jeni. Soft, sweet, sexy, feminine and elegant. He could see and smell her in everything in the home.

He needed to get this over with and get out of here. Swinging around to exit the premises and tell Jeni it was safe for her to come in, he bumped right into her. His hands came up in reflex, grasping each of her upper arms. A shock of intense heat seared through him, but arousal soon turned to rage. He shook her. "Why didn't you wait for me to tell you it was okay to come inside?"

She winced and closed her eyes to shut him out, jerking away from his grasp. When he went to reach for again, she raised her arms as if to shield her face. His gut tightened. She believed he had it in him to strike her. He reached out slowly, so as not to frighten her further. He pulled her to him, his arms going around her as he tugged her softness against his hardness.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you, or frighten you. I wanted it to be safe for you. That's all. I can't protect you if you're out in the open." He rocked her in his arms, shielding her. Jeni melted into him, her hands on his chest, wedged between their bodies. He continued to hold her close, swaying back and forth. She ran her hand up his chest and over his shoulder. He tensed as tremors ran through him. She moved closer and placed her head in the nape of his neck, breathing him in.

She fit in his arms as if they'd been made for each, as if perfection existed in their respective builds. He tightened his grip on her as his hormones raged, wild and free. This did nothing for his aching libido, except to harden it even more and cause him grueling pain. His jeans tightened over his lower body.

He had to get away from her, or he'd scare her even more by doing something irrational they'd both regret. Dropping his shaky arms from around her and missing her warmth, he wished he had the right to hold her longer.

He backed away. "I'll set up a stakeout in my car in the driveway. It'll warn anyone who comes by, and I can see if anyone looks suspicious. If you need anything, I'll be right outside."

He turned to go, but she stopped him with her hand on his arm. He flinched. She gazed up at him, wide-eyed, fear shadowing her eyes. "Would you please stay inside on the sofa? I'd feel ... safer?"

He caved. His heart rolled over in his chest. Why was she getting to him so badly? He didn't want her to. He never wanted to care for anyone else again and risk losing her like he'd lost Isabella. He couldn't go through what he'd endured when Isabella was killed again. He knew that, but he couldn't stop himself.

He nodded and faltered at the thought of being alone with her in her small house and in such close proximity, thinking of her in her bed. He'd have a rough night, considering his growing discomfort. His jeans tightened again. His manhood swelled painfully thinking of her. He asked for trouble, but he couldn't leave her while she trembled in fear. Would John and Sal and the rest of his family think this was progress?

Jeni directed him to the sofa and brought him a pillow and blankets. He couldn't tear his eyes from her as she came toward him. She dropped the linen on the sofa, turned, and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her with a quiet click. It was all he could do not to try to follow her. He imagined her lying in her large bed, alone, wearing...

Stop it. This is getting you nowhere, you lunkhead. No way would he get any sleep. [Back to Table of Contents]

90

Eight

Jeni woke with a start, her heart pounding, the rhythm erratic. Had she heard a noise? Was she not alone?

The prior night's events came crashing back to her. The abduction. The fear. The feelings for Nick.

It'd taken a long time for her to fall asleep, thinking of Nick in the next room, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't ruin her life by messing with her set schedule. She needed her PhD, her future teaching job as a professor at a university, and her dream. Those things were safe. Men weren't. Nick certainly wasn't.

She didn't need Nick. She did feel safer with him in her home though, and she slept soundly once she relaxed. And she dreamed a silly dream ... of him.

Oh, Dio. Nick Tarentino camped out in her living room, guarding and protecting her. Her heart thundered in her ears. She wasn't sure if that made her feel better, or worse. She'd have to face him, her protector.

Who would protect her from Nick, or from herself, and the fact she felt drawn to him like a honey bee to pollen? The attraction between them was tangible. The air sang with the vibrations of it. She didn't want to give in to her desire, have some meaningless fling, and then go back to her studies and want more. She had to reach her goal and stay away from temptation.

Jeni started to roll over to get out of bed. She gasped. The results of the previous evening took their toll. She was sore,

everywhere. She eased off the bed, showered her brittle body, and started for the kitchen, feeling closer to normal. She'd make breakfast and...

The aroma of coffee brewing halted her footsteps. Bacon sizzled loud enough for her to recognize the sound even as she stood in her bedroom doorway. She tiptoed into her kitchen and came to a dead stop. Nick's jeans hung low on his narrow hips, zipper zipped, but button unbuttoned. His short, tapered hair, cut military-style, had looked disheveled last night, like he'd been stressed to the max. This morning his mane was wet, and combed, slicked back, and sexy as hell.

She gulped and ran her eyes over him. He was half naked.

Nick wore no shirt, and his bare, muscled chest drew her undivided attention. He looked as dangerous to her this morning as her kidnapper the night before. In a very different way, of course, but lethal nonetheless. It wasn't her life she was in danger of losing with Nick. It was her pitter-pattering heart.

He looked up and met her gaze. She jumped, shocked by an electrical current, and the blood rush to her cheeks with magnificent speed. She hoped he couldn't tell her breath came in short spurts. The heat sparked between them, and the effect of it seared her from all the way across the kitchen.

* * * *

Jeni's fresh scent reached Nick's begging nostrils all the way across the kitchen. The bacon did nothing to curtail her enticing aroma. He inhaled the pleasant odor of the same shampoo she'd used the day before, clean, fresh, intoxicating, and pure Jeni, a scent she made her own.

He couldn't drag his eyes away from her. He raked them over her lithe, trim but curvy body. She looked tired, but she also looked edible, standing there with her ebony hair wet from her shower. She wore a simple shorts outfit, cotton, nothing spectacular. She'd apparently chosen the clothes for comfort. Today would prove to be a long, grueling day.

"I hope you don't mind. I used your half bath to clean up some, and I was getting hungry. Thought I'd throw something together for both of us. If you ever got up." He grinned at her, baiting her, trying to cover up the desire about to consume him.

"What time is it?"

"Ten o'clock." Nick quirked his lips.

"Oh, my, how early it is. And to think I got in bed so early. What? 6:00 a.m.? Wow. I should've been up hours ago. Excuse me for being so lazy. *Mi scusi*." She laid her hand on the side of her face in exaggerated mock sarcasm.

Nick chuckled. Jeni could smile and joke after what she'd gone through. Fantastic. Pride surged through him, followed by that overwhelming need to protect and care for her, followed further by hatred for someone who tried to harm her, followed again by guilt. *Isabella*.

He really did need to sort out his mixed feelings. He wished he had time to get some space between himself and Jeni, time to think about these new emotions developing, trying to rip him apart. Jeni moved to the counter. Nick fixed her a plate of bacon, eggs and hash browns. They sat at the glass-topped, goldrimmed table and ate in silence. Nick could think of nothing to say or ask, other than what might seem too personal to Jeni, or more like a continued interrogation. He wanted to wait to get to the station for further details, and he hadn't had much experience with small talk as of late. What would his brothers do at a time like this? And since when did he need advice on talking to a woman at a breakfast table?

Jeni finished and started cleaning up the dishes. Nick took the opportunity to escape and called his captain. "I'm gonna finish questioning Jeni, uh, Miss Campanelli, this morning. I'll need to talk to the other women at the hospital, too, or at least the ones able to talk at this point. We need to try to match up their profiles, see why the perp grabbed these women, instead of someone else. Maybe there's a connection that leads to motive."

"Sounds good. Get on it as soon as possible, and hook up with Vick and fill her in. You wouldn't believe the grief the media is giving us on this one. They're like a bunch of rabid rats."

"Will do, but in the meantime, give them the standard no comment."

"That's what I do best."

Nick hit end and phoned the hospital. "Hey, Karen. Nick Tarentino. How are the girls we brought in last night?"

Karen chuckled. "Hey, Nick. Like I wouldn't recognize your voice. You Tarentino boys have the sexiest vocal cords in the world."

Nick grinned. "You could brighten up the cloudiest day, you know that, Karen?"

"I do try, and I bet this will help to make your day better. The two rescued-but-unconscious women you dragged in here are awake and will pull out of it just fine. They're all still here, though. The woman with you was the only one released."

Nick stepped back into the kitchen where Jeni washed dishes. "The other ladies in the hospital are going to recover fully."

Jeni touched a hand to her chest. "Oh, good."

Nick put the phone on speaker, and Karen added, "There were bumps and bruises all round, and there was some worry about rabies."

Jeni's eyes widened. "What? Why?"

"The women who'd been underground for longer than a day had been bitten by rats, but their overall condition is good. There was some fear of loss of hands and feet, due to the lack of circulation." Karen seldom held anything back. This was no exception.

"Let the hospital staff know they should be expecting me to stop by and question the women ASAP." Nick hoped they could remember something, even if Jeni couldn't.

"No problem. Gotta go. Code blue." Karen broke the connection.

Jeni fidgeted. "What about later?"

Nick sat in a chair and hooked one foot over the other. "What do you mean?"

Jeni sat, too, her spine rigid. "Do they have families?"

Nick understood her line of thinking then. "They have police protection outside their doors at the hospital. If they want it when they return home, they can have it, but that usually only lasts for a short time. They might not require it, depending on where they live and their family situations." All of the women had been reported missing by loved ones, and they all had someone to go home to, except Jeni. "Feel like more questions down at the station yet?"

"Sure. The third degree. Great." She rolled her eyes, smiling, but Nick didn't like the dark circles on her beautiful face.

"I'd like to let you rest, but the longer we let the case go, the colder it gets."

"No reason to wait." Jeni headed for her bedroom then stopped. "I was going to grab my purse, but I don't have it. It's the oddest feeling."

He chuckled, and they headed out the door. "I bet. Women are attached to those things like a third arm." He held the door for her then pulled it closed and locked it. "After I file the report and get some of the investigation out of the way, I can take you to pick up your car. First, I need to question you and spend some time with the other women who were abducted. Try to find a connecting link between all of you. See why the kidnapper took the seven of you."

She looked away and waited for him to open her car door. "Who'll take over as a stakeout?"

"No one. I'll do it." Nick shut the door and rounded the hood to his side of the vehicle.

She kept her gaze locked on the dashboard as he climbed in and started the car. "You don't have to keep bringing me home and staying with me. I'm sure you have someone to go home to. I'm under police protection, so maybe this guy won't try again so soon. Besides, we all got away the first time. Wouldn't that be asking to get caught if he comes after me right under a stakeout's nose?"

"First, I live alone. Second, you don't know how crazy some people are. Sometimes they want to get caught. We don't know why you were kidnapped, so we don't know the motive or how insane the perp is. We can't take the chance."

Didn't she understand he needed to protect her? He'd promised Isabella he'd do that. He wouldn't fail her again, and he'd be damned if another woman in his life would be hurt on his watch.

* * * *

Jeni sat silent as Nick headed downtown. He was irritated and sulking again, and she didn't know why he'd gotten so angry so fast.

By the time they got to the station, the office was filled to the brim with police officers, and things were hectic. The cops would've probably called the noise organized chaos.

The female officer from the night before, Martinelli, placed her hand on Nick's shoulder. "Do you want a cup of coffee, Nick?"

Not a bit obvious, are you, Vick? "Sure. What about you, Jeni?" Jeni shook her head and squelched the desire to bolt. If she didn't know better, she'd think a pang of jealousy had popped its head around the corner of her heart, but since she wanted no part of *any* man, it couldn't be that. Martinelli's rude glances frustrated her. That's all it was. Jeni didn't like rude people, and Martinelli's was the epitome of rude.

Nick skimmed his fingers over the files his captain had handed him when he entered his office.

Martinelli waltzed by Jeni, flaunting what she had for all it was worth. Jeni caught the scent of her perfume again, and warning bells and whistles went off in her head. The notquite-recognition of the aroma sent shivers up her spine. Jeni hugged herself. *Why does that cologne bother me*?

"What's wrong?" Nick's brows furrowed, and his eyes pinned her.

"I don't know. It's the smell of her perfume." Jeni wrinkled her nose, sniffing the air like a hound dog searching for its master's quarry. "I don't know why, but it reminds me of something, or someone..." Her voice drifted off.

Nick eyed her a little longer. "If it comes to you, let me know."

Jeni pinched her nose. "Why?"

Nick shrugged. "Maybe nothing. Maybe something. You never know, and I'm curious."

He pulled a large notebook out of his desk and dragged a tape recorder closer to them. Jeni sighed and prepared herself for the grueling questions. Nick turned the recorder to face her. "Okay, I need to try to find out as much about you as I can, so that when I question the others I can try to find out if there is a common link. A serial killer always has a motive. Sometimes the motives are farfetched, but they're motives. There's usually a tie between the victims, like where they work, their names, their hair color, whatever. So, here goes."

Nick flipped the power on and hit record. "First, I know where you live, and I'll find out where the other victims live in relation to your home. Second, I'm gonna check to see if any of the others are students. Do you know any of the others?"

"No, or at least from the ones I saw quickly last night, no. Remember, it was dark, and most of the time my eyes were covered. I might recognize some of them later on."

"Okay. You said you're a student, but do you work anywhere? Part time, while going to school?"

She winced at his question and closed her eyes. "No."

He stared at her. "I hate to push, but I need to know why the topic of employment bothers you."

She crossed her arms over her breasts and looked away. "I'm living off blood money."

Nick blinked. "What exactly does that mean?"

She continued to stare off into space. "Insurance." She lifted a shaky hand, taking a deep breath. "Would you mind turning that thing off a minute?"

Nick did as she asked. "Tell me about it, and I'll decide what needs repeating for the official interview."

Jen blew out a breath. "Okay, off the record, nothing was ever proven, but the accident was probably gang related."

Nick blinked. "I can't believe I forgot about that. Rumor was gang members would drive down the road with their

lights off, either at night or when it was raining, and shoot at cars passing by as part of an initiation. Sick bastards."

Jeni nodded. She'd struck some kind of sensitive spot. He'd gone pale, like he had last night at the hospital. "In this case, it was a rainy day. Reports were given by survivors that they flashed their lights to warn the oncoming car their lights were off, and the gang members headed straight for the oncoming car, as if they were going to hit them head-on, like playing chicken."

Nick sat forward, his elbows on his knees. "The cars driven by innocent people were forced to swerve off the road, and the driver and passengers, who'd been kind enough to try to warn some idiot gang member, were hurt. In the case of your parents and many others, they were killed."

Jeni shuddered. "Twenty cars. Can you imagine how many people suffered? Still suffer? It's not just about the ones in the cars. It's the people they leave behind."

Nick flinched. "Go on."

There was more to his story, and Jeni wanted to know what had happened to him. Why did he look like he understood exactly how she felt? "They were on a bridge over a deep ravine. They went over the side, and their car exploded into flames on impact. They died instantly and were burned beyond recognition."

Tears stung the backs of her eyes, and she swiped at them. Nick looked like he wanted to puke.

* * * *

Nick hopped to his feet. A hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach and a lump in his throat threatened to turn to nausea. Isabella and Jeni had way too damn much in common. He and Jeni did, too, but Jeni was also forced to think about the terrors of her present.

When would fate deal them a good hand? Didn't they deserve to be as happy as the next person? Why must they suffer at the hands of ruthless criminals when all they wanted was to be left alone to live their lives in peace?

Jeni wiped at a falling tear. A floodgate of emotions had opened up, too long contained, Nick suspected. It might be for the best, though, if she talked about her parents' deaths. It might help her deal with the hurt and pain she continued to hold inside her. *Humph*. Might even work for him. He never talked about Isabella. Not even with his family. They called him a damn clam all the damn time.

He sat down and placed his hand on hers as it lay on the desk next to his computer. Such an odd place for such a delicate hand. "Tell me about them, Jeni."

"You wouldn't believe it." She shook her head as she chuckled.

"Why not? They can't be all that bad. They raised someone like you."

Jeni blinked. "I guess they did, didn't they?"

Nick smiled. "Unless someone else raised you? Didn't you live with them?"

"Yes, but I hadn't thought of it that way in a long time. I had this wonderful speech and a card all written out nicely for them, thanking them. They never saw it, never read the words I had for them after graduation." Jeni sniffed and wiped her eyes and nose with a tissue Nick handed her. She wasn't the first teary eyed witness he'd dealt with, but she definitely got to him on a much deeper level than any before her.

Nick yanked the small trash can closer to her and pulled out another tissue to have on hand in case. "They would've liked the card and the words, I'm sure."

Jeni locked her gaze with his. "Maybe not. I thanked them, and I ridiculed them at the same time, all in one card. I told them I'd grown up, and they needed to do the same. I graduated in the top ten of my class. They hadn't come close to that in their educational lives. They were wanderers until I got to high school. I've lived in so many different states I can't list them all. They stopped moving when I started my freshman year, and I threatened to drop out of school and run away if I couldn't go through my high school years in the same school. I had no friends. I was tired of being the new kid."

"I don't think that's true. You told me about Coni and Laura."

Jeni rolled her eyes. "Yes, I have them. We're as close as anyone else I'd consider friends or family." Jeni stood, pulling her hand from under Nick's. "My dad was good with his hands. He worked in construction. He could build anything. I'll give him that. Anyone needed a handyman, they called my dad."

Nick stood and stuck his hands in his pockets. "That's a good thing. Saved your family a lot of money in repairs if

your mom could give him a honey-do list and convince him to keep the house in order."

Jeni locked her gaze with his again. "My mom was a dreamer. She wouldn't have cared if the house fell apart around our ankles, but she could paint, and she did. Sold her art now and then for small amounts. I was proud of her for that, and I still am, but she was definitely a starving artist, or would've been if not for my dad's income." Jeni grinned. "Talk about flower children. Those two took the sixties philosophy and adhered to it with a vengeance. They were green before being green was in. They conserved energy. They recycled everything. They were Earth Day maniacs, and they drove me nuts as a teen."

Nick chuckled. "Don't let my sisters-in-law hear you badmouth environmentalism. They'd be on you like white on rice."

Jeni smiled. "I guess it wasn't so bad, but everything added up and made me bonkers. My dad drove like he had a death wish, and my mom could sleep through it while I gripped the seat and closed my eyes." Jeni swallowed hard, sat back down, and bit her lip. "I blamed him."

Nick sat, too. "For what?"

"The accident."

"How?"

"He could've avoided the bumper of the guy in front of him if he didn't always stick to the back end of the vehicle in his path like glue. Drove like he owned the whole road and said he had the right since he paid taxes on both sides. Hell of a philosophy." "You don't know it was his fault, though, and if it was, all the other drivers had the same driving style, and you'd have to blame those drivers, too." Nick touched her knee. "Do you? Or do you think it might've been the gangs to blame, not the innocent victims?"

Jen winced. "You're supposed to be listening, not giving me a lecture."

Nick put his hands in front of him. "No lecture, just a suggestion."

Jeni twisted her face. "Well, that takes the cake. All this time I've been pissed off at the wrong people. Not that I didn't hate the gang members, but my parents were top of the list of who was at fault. How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Change my mind."

"Logic."

Jeni studied him, and his heartbeat picked up. Her measuring gaze had nothing to with her parents anymore. She was trying to read him. She proved it with her next words. "What happened to you, Nick?"

He shook his head. "Not going there. We have work to do. Let's get it done."

Jeni kept her eyes locked to his, and Nick's here-to-fore iceberg heart flipped over in his chest. She didn't have to suffer guilt, but he harbored his own share of useless blame. He knew deep down there was nothing he could've done to protect Isabella and stop her gruesome death, but, he held on to the guilt, as if it'd keep Isabella close to him and her memory alive. All it did was keep him from truly living. Jeni's parents wouldn't want her to hurt or be alone for the rest of her life. What about him?

Nick hesitated a moment, then he raised his arm and put his hand on the side of her face, pushing stray strands of hair back behind her ear. He ran his fingers through the back of her luscious locks, so soft and silky and shiny. He caught the fresh scent on a floating wave and breathed it in.

Wonderful. Like wildflowers. Intoxicating. Erotic. Jeni.

He closed his eyes and dropped his hand to keep from pulling her to him right there in front of everyone. He leaned back in his chair, but she caught his hand in hers, linked her fingers in his, and held his hand against her cheek. She looked him right in the eye. "Thank you for saving me, Nick, and thank you for listening. I'll never forget what you've done for me."

Heat flashed through his gut, and the electricity jarred him through their linked fingertips. "It wasn't your fault. I couldn't let you think it was. Your parents would've wanted you to be happy. They took out those policies in case of a tragedy. In case they couldn't be there in person for you. It's what they would've wanted. They loved you."

Jeni dropped his hand, stood up, and walked away, crossing her arms and keeping her back to him. Nick forced himself to stay seated, not wanting to embarrass her in front of his colleagues. She snapped out of it after a few minutes, gaining control of herself. She slapped the tears away and wheeled back to face him. "Anyway, no, I don't work."

Nick needed to get back to being professional and focus on the case. He needed to ask direct questions and stop looking into her fabulous eyes. She distracted him. It was his own fault. She wasn't doing it on purpose. He knew she wasn't. She wasn't being seductive, just brutally honest, and alarmingly innocent, which is why she affected him so intensely.

He'd had other women before Isabella. Those other women had been experienced and straightforward. He'd known how to deal with them. He didn't have the faintest idea what to do with Jeni and her apparent lack of experience. He didn't think she was a virgin. She was too beautiful not to have been caught by anyone, but she wasn't a seductress or overly experienced.

He cleared his throat and fiddled with his notebook. He banged his pencil on the edge of his desk. "How old are you?"

She came back and sat down, rolling her eyes and flashing him a weak smile. "Ugh, do you have to ask *that?*"

She did it again, bounced back to her casual, joking, softhearted self, even in the face of sadness and tragedy.

How does she compose herself and enjoy life so easily?

It has to be the innocence.

Nick had seen too much pain, too much horror, in his gory line of work. Homicide wasn't pretty. It was downright ugly. And at the bright old age of thirty, he was too old for her, in more ways than one.

He looked up at her. "You're avoiding my questions, Miss Campanelli. How old?"

She laughed, and the hearty sound was music to his ears. "Okay, Okay, I'm twenty-five. Satisfied?" "Twenty-five? And working on your PhD, so young? That's impressive." Nick smiled and sipped at his coffee. She looked younger.

She shrugged. "That's about average actually, but maybe a little early. I was seventeen when I graduated from high school, nineteen when I earned my associates degree, twenty-two for my bachelor's degree, and now I'm twentyfive with a masters."

"When's your birthday?"

"Yesterday."

Nick blinked. "Yesterday? And you were only celebrating your graduation?"

Jeni shrugged. "I don't tell people my personal information, so Coni and Laura didn't know."

Nick shook his head. "Okay, well, happy late birthday. Some present you got there. A concussion for your twentyfifth." Nick scribbled down the date. "I'll see when the other women had their birthdays and how old they are. You never know. Maybe that's the connection." He glanced at her. "Can I ask you the questions and record now?"

"Fine."

Nick flipped the recorder back on and went through a list of questions that covered her past in a non-personal way but got the facts down in case there was a connection to her family.

Nick stopped for a minute and banged his pencil against the desk in a quick rhythm. Jeni narrowed her eyes. "Okay, ask. What now?" "You told me already there's no husband and no boyfriend. How about dating? Is there anyone?" Why was he afraid to know the answer?

"No. I vowed to earn my PhD, with honors, nothing less than a 4.0. So far I've achieved all my goals, and I don't have time for relationships, only studying. I have a well laid out plan. I don't want to mess it up." She crossed her arms like a bulldozer in front of her body and heart as if to shield herself or fortify her determination.

He couldn't help it. The air fled from his lungs, and the blood drained from his face. He'd wanted her to say there was no one else, and when she did, the tinge of jealousy subsided. He shouldn't be thinking of why he liked her or who else she might be with.

Why couldn't he stick to the questions and remain detached? He was losing the battle with his emotions. He rocked on the edge of giving what was left of his shattered heart away to the woman sitting in front of him, hurting as badly as him. He could relate to her goals, but in a different way. His goal was revenge.

Were John and Sal right? Would Isabella want something different for him? Would Jeni ever be able to stop running from her past and start over? Would he?

Nick needed a breath of fresh air and a timeout from these professional questions leading to personal thoughts of the woman he was supposed to be helping. He stopped the recording and turned off the power. "I think I have enough information from you for now. Let's get out of here for a while. I need to talk to the other girls and see how your stories and profiles match up. Give me a few minutes to talk to my captain and make a copy of these notes for Martinelli. I'll look over the files on the other women as I question each of them."

Nick picked up his keys and the missing persons files containing information on each of the abductees. He left Jeni sitting at his desk while he talked to his captain, and Martinelli, who'd been throwing nasty glances Jeni's way the whole time Nick questioned her. He'd have to talk to his callous partner about her crude behavior.

Within minutes, he was ready to go, he and his captain and Martinelli all on the same wavelength and informed as well as they could be to this point. He faced Jeni. "Let's head on over to the hospital. Ready?"

Jeni rose to follow him, and he placed his arm at the small of her back to lead her out of the office. He'd meant it only as a gesture of guidance, but Jeni caught her breath, and Nick noticed the slightest halt in her step.

So much for remaining aloof, but he wasn't about to remove his hand. It felt too damn right to hold her.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Nine

Jeni liked the warmth of Nick's hand on her lower back. Heat emanated from his body and transferred to hers like a manic conductor of energy and desire. The warmth worked its way throughout her whole torso, spreading all the way from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet, making her blush from her hot cheeks to her toes which felt much better in her Nikes than they had last night in those stupid spiked heels she couldn't believe the kidnapper hadn't pitched. Shoes were the least of her worries. She tingled with an odd sensation, and she liked it. That was a problem.

She moved away from his grasp as soon as they were out the door of the police station. Trying to breathe normally, she kept pace with Nick as he walked her toward his car. Any minute now her traitorous, weak knees might give out, though, and she'd fall flat on her face. Then she'd be embarrassed *and* aroused. Great. Just what she needed.

Nick opened the car door and helped her inside with a hand to her elbow. What was it with him and touching? She'd always been that way. People had told her she had a bad habit of getting in their space, but she hadn't meant anything by it. She got the distinct impression Nick didn't touch much, but when he did, he meant it.

He released her and closed the door, heading for the driver's side. She was glad to be getting some much-needed distance from him, but she missed the feel of his strong hand and long fingers. Cops hands, but he used them for hard work, too. The calluses did nothing to take away from his sensuality. How did they get that rough? What did he do in his spare time to give his hands such texture? Did he have something in common with her father? Did he work with wood in his time off? Her dad's hands always felt that way. Rough and warm, and downright comforting.

Jeni took a deep, steadying breath and tried to get a hold of herself. It didn't matter what he did in his spare time. She wouldn't be sticking around to find out.

Climbing in on his side of the car, Nick started the engine. Jeni attempted to shrink into oblivion on her side of the car, or maybe slither through the door and fade to nothing. She sincerely doubted Nick felt as excited and affected as she.

Nick's voice made her jump, but it also brought her thoughts back to the case. "So, what do we have so far? We know who you are, where you live, where you were the night you were abducted, and that some handsy creep danced with you."

"Yeah, Clint." Jeni wanted even more to disappear into the passenger seat.

"Last name?"

"I don't know. I wasn't planning on getting to know him better." Jeni regretted her icy tone the minute she used it. Nick didn't deserve her cold sharpness. It wasn't his fault she was confused. "I'm sorry. There's no call for me to snap at you. I'm a little edgy, and I want my life back. I'm a control freak, and I feel like I'm being pulled in too many directions."

She stared at her hands and twisted them together, a nervous habit she couldn't break. It'd always been her calling

card, and her mother used to scold her for it. She'd had such poise, even for a flower child.

Nick reached for her hands and covered them with one of his own, a tender gesture that brought fresh tears to Jeni's eyes. "We're gonna find this guy. You can have your life back and make your parents proud. Until then, I'm here to protect you and stop the SOB from ever doing this to anyone else again."

He'd spoken with tenderness and understanding, but also with determination. Jeni believed he'd do what he vowed and end this stressful time for her as soon as possible, but she wasn't as happy about that as she should've been. Ending the case meant ending her time with Nick. Wasn't that what she wanted? Wouldn't she be glad when she had her life back? She could go back to her studies, alone, and mark off the days, weeks, months and years of her perfectly planned calendar. Life would be grand.

* * * *

Nick pulled into a parking lot near the emergency room entrance and got out to open Jeni's door. He entered the hospital with Jeni at his side and approached the information center. "Hey, Karen."

"Hey, hottie."

Nick chuckled. "I bet you say that to all the guys."

"Nope. I only say things I mean, and the term hottie is reserved for the Tarentino boys."

"Okay then, if I'm so high on your list, why don't you tell me which room Sarah Fratello is in?" "Sure thing. Let me check." Karen opened the file on her computer, her nails clicking across the keys lightning fast. "Room 322. Go on up. I'll let them know you're on your way."

Karen picked up the phone and Nick winked at her. "Thanks." He turned to Jeni, gripped her elbow, and led the way to the elevator. "I want to start with Sarah Fratello. She was the one tied nearest to you in the hole, so she was the most recently kidnapped, except for you."

Jeni nodded. "Maybe that means she'll be in the best condition to remember details and answer your questions. Maybe she saw or heard something I didn't since she was already there and possibly awake while I was being tied to the ladder."

Nick glanced at her. "I hope so, and if so, she can put me on the right track to catching your abductor. I need a lead as to who could've done this to you."

Nick's patience ran thin as he headed down the hallway, but Dr. Pietro Marti, the emergency room physician who'd attended the kidnap victims and now oversaw their posttrauma care, stopped him and pulled him aside. "Can I have a minute, Nick?"

Nick had known Dr. Marti for years. If he wanted a word, he'd get one. "Sure, doc." He touched Jeni's arm. "Wait here a second."

Nick could see Sarah Fratello in the waiting room behind the doctor. He recognized Sarah from the picture in her missing person's file. "Has she been released?"

"Yes."

Sarah stood with her hands up in front of her with her fingers linked together as if begging for forgiveness and mercy from the man in front of her and praying she'd be granted her plea.

"What's up?" Nick squinted at the familiar scene unfolding in front of him. The guy pointed his finger at the frightened woman and gritted his teeth, holding his voice down but grinding out each word with a suppressed rage that was barely under control and only because he was in a public setting. Nick had seen his type before. Did Nick have his next suspect?

Dr. Marti scowled. "I've seen her before. Sarah. As a patient here. Repeatedly."

"And?"

Dr. Marti shook his head in disapproval, speaking with more than a hint of sadness and regret in his voice for the woman he couldn't help. "I've seen him before, too. Her husband."

Dr. Marti had always taken caring for his patients seriously and their health conditions personally. "He uses her for a punching bag, and most of the bruises and fractures she has now aren't due to being abducted. If she goes back home to him, she's no safer than she was with her kidnapper. Franco will end up killing her."

Dr. Marti jabbed a thumb toward the man standing in front of Sarah, belittling and frightening her, then he turned and stalked away, leaving Nick to deal with the situation.

Nick started toward the couple, Jeni right behind him. Sarah shrank away from the giant of a man in front of her. "Please, Franco. I went out with my sister for her birthday. I meant nothing against you."

Franco grabbed at her wrist. "You slut."

Frank's whole body shook, and Sarah winced in pain, her wrist visibly raw from being restrained for two days with duct tape. She'd been kidnapped on Thursday, so she'd been in that hole for over twenty-four hours. Her husband had little sympathy for her, clearly, and he caused her more trauma and injury now.

Franco never saw it coming. Nick grabbed the same arm Franco used to hold Sarah's frail wrist. He yanked Franco's arm behind his back in one swift move and threw Franco up against the wall and pinned him there.

Franco yelped then cursed. Nick withdrew a set of handcuffs from his back belt loop and hooked them around Franco's wrists behind his back. "Don't move. Don't even think about it, or I'll have you arrested for assault and battery right here, right now."

Nick jerked Franco away from the wall with more force than necessary, slamming him backward and shoving him down into a chair. Franco had it coming. Lord only knew how many times he'd abused Sarah and caused her pain she didn't deserve. "I'm going to ask you some questions, but tick me off or lie to me just once, and I'll throw you in jail so fast your head will swim. First question, where were you at about 10:30 last night?"

"I was at my parents' house, where Sarah should have been. Her place is with me, not with her useless sister, Trish. Trish hates me and gives Sarah uppity ideas and makes her want to disrespect me every time she goes out with her. Well, we see where it got her this time, don't we?" Franco bared his teeth lie a vicious cur.

"I'm going to check this out, and you'd better hope I can believe your parents when I question them. What are their names and number?" Franco told him, and he scribbled on his ever-present notepad. "They'd better not cover for you, or I'll find out in the end. Now get out of here, and leave Sarah alone. She's been through enough without you adding to it. Any argument, and I leave those cuffs on you, got it?"

Franco got it, but he didn't like it. He gave a curt nod, and stood still while Nick removed the cuffs. Then he stomped away red-faced. Nick worried about what Franco might do to Sarah when she went home to him, but he'd have to deal with this one step at a time. He needed some information he could only get from another victim. He needed to question Sarah. Nick approached her. Her eyes darted away and filled with tears. "Tell me you don't want to continue to live with that guy."

"I have to. He's my husband."

"You don't have to, but if you think you do, and you refuse to leave him, we need to think about other arrangements for awhile, at least tonight, until he calms down, and until we're certain he had nothing to do with your abduction." Nick tried not to sound too stern. Her future was bleak enough as it was if she stayed with Franco.

"If I don't go home, he'll be even more angry." A flash of fear shot into Sarah's wild eyes.

"And if you do go home, you could be back here again, in this hospital, or maybe the morgue. Do you have anyone to call, someone you can stay with?"

Sarah thought a minute, her eyes wide and wet. "I can call my sister, Trish, but she lives a few hours away. I can stay in a hotel for the night." Sarah lowered her red-rimmed eyes.

Jeni stepped up beside him, and he became aware of her closeness. She touched him on the arm, sending shock waves of heat reverberating through him. She reached out her other hand to take Sarah's hand in hers. Sarah continued to stand stiff as a board in front of them, averting her wary, sad eyes.

"You can come home with me," Jeni said. "I have a small home, but I'll make room for you."

Was that a good idea? Jeni put herself at odds with Franco, who clearly wouldn't leave well enough alone and would come after Sarah, and anyone who tried to protect her. He sighed. Things were going from bad to worse.

"Great idea, girls, and I'll camp out on the couch tonight. Neither Franco, nor whoever kidnapped you, will mess with you on my watch." He tried to ease the tension. "Usually perps like this are cowards when it comes to attacking innocent women. They want to get them alone, catch them off guard, and do their dirty work. I think you can feel safe with me in the next room."

Nick tried to reassure the ladies, but he wasn't so sure of their safety. He'd seen the work of serial killers, and they tended to grow more dangerous, bolder and more intense, as their desperation increased and their psyches became more aggravated. Since that was all they had to go on at this point, Nick assumed he dealt with a serial killer and worked that angle, until he had more clues to go on and evidence told him otherwise.

"Thank you." Sarah drew a shuddering breath. "It'll take Trish five hours to get from Kansas City to pick me up."

"Fine. You want to borrow my cell phone?"

Sarah nodded, dialed the number, and reassured Trish she was fine, for now, under police protection. Sarah talked for a moment, and then hung up, handing the phone back to Nick with fresh tears in her eyes. "She's coming in the morning. She'll dial your number back when she's almost here, and I can give her directions then if that's okay with you."

Jeni smiled at Sarah. "It's perfectly fine with me, and you can stay as long as you'd like. Nick makes a mean breakfast, and there's plenty of coffee for us to talk some girl talk over."

Nick rolled his eyes with mock exasperation. "Great. Girl talk. Just what the world needs more of." He turned serious. "But it also gives me a better opportunity to ask you the questions I need answers to, try to match your situation with Jeni's, and find the missing link that explains why you and the other women were abducted. We need to catch this creep before he strikes again, if that's his plan."

Sarah rubbed her hand over her arm in a protective gesture. She'd been there longer than Jeni, and her trauma would likely be longer lasting. "I woke up and realized there were others around me, and I waited, and feared the worst. It was a long time, felt like forever, before I heard another victim being taped nearby." Sarah glanced at Jeni, her eyes glazing over with the ugly memory. "Did you hear anything that might give the perp's identity away? Did he speak? Would you be able to identify his voice?"

"No. He said nothing. I saw nothing. I know nothing." She offered a weak, watery smile.

Sarah probably wouldn't be much help, but Nick had to try, for all of the victims. He didn't want to ask any more prying questions for now, though. They needed a break from the tension. He was hungry, and they had to be hungry by now, too. "Okay, let's take a break. We need food. I'll take you both out for dinner, and we'll head back to Jeni's for more questions. Sound okay?"

Jeni blinked and stared at him, but only for a second, as if he'd said something wrong. He decided to brush it off, for now. "Where to, ladies?"

Jeni suggested a pizza place near her home, and Nick shrugged. "Well, since everyone loves pizza, why not?"

He stepped between the ladies, put his arm around each of their waists, pulled Jeni close, and headed for his car and the promised pizza. At the contact with Jeni's soft, pliant body against his hard one, the sparks flew.

Of all the bright ideas.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Ten

Dear Journal: The bitches have been rescued.

It won't matter. I'll get my revenge. I'm not giving up. If they think I can't get to them, they're nuts, and I'm about to add arson to the list of crimes perpetrated by her.

I'm gonna start with #6, Thursday, and work my way backwards. I'll torch her house and leave a calling card that will identify her as the criminal, not me. By the time I'm done with them, they'll be dead, and the cops and their families will wish they'd died in that hole because now I'll punish them for making me go after them again.

And that bitch that betrayed me will be in the slammer for life, or better yet, she'll get the needle. Too bad they don't fry people in the electric chair anymore, or hang 'em high.

I'm saving #7, Friday, for last. Tarentino can't take his eyes, or his hands, off her. They're all over the news. The press thinks they ought to be in the spotlight, flaunting their escape, but my next move will shut them up. Maybe not literally because they'll talk about it on every channel, but it'll make them think twice about thinking I'm not good enough to get at them.

Jeni will pay, too, hard. The skanky little whore.

* * * *

Jeni relaxed and watched Nick. He reclined in his chair, his feet propped up on an impromptu foot stool, an empty

cardboard box he'd dragged from behind the booth. Sarah sat stone-silent across the table, worry lines creasing her forehead. Jeni pushed the tray of pizza toward her. "Sarah, you've only eaten one piece and drank a half a glass of soda. I wish you'd eat and forget about your troubles for awhile."

Sarah picked up another slice of pizza. "That's easier said than done."

"I've stuffed my face with too much pizza myself. My belly's going to explode. Can a person actually die of a belly ache?"

Nick chuckled and tucked his thumbs in his pants. "Depends."

Jeni moaned and rubbed her expanded gut. "On what?"

"On why your stomach hurts." Nick touched his own beltline, and Jeni took note of his large hands and his narrow waistline that angled so nicely down to his hips.

Jeni groaned and closed her eyes. "Does eating too much cheese ever do a person in?"

Nick grinned, his face full of boyish charm and a lopsided twist of his lips. "Don't think so. Unless you're lactose intolerant to the extreme." He winked at her, all charm and humor, under the oddest of circumstances. "At least the pain might keep our minds off the situation that brought us together, until later when I grill you, that is."

Jeni's brow knitted together. "Well, not if you remind us like that. So drop it. Let's engage in some easier, nonsensical banter." She reached over and patted his hand, the one resting on the table beside her after he'd snapped his cell phone shut. Who was he texting? "Time to go veg out on the sofa at my house and hope our tummies don't pop. Need a crane to pull you up off that chair?"

Nick winked, reached for her hand, and grasped it tight in his. "Nope. Just yank me up out of here from your perch." She tugged on his fingers, locked into hers. "Are you sure you're up for renting a video game, or would you rather plop down on the rug in front of the fireplace for a flick?"

Jeni rolled her eyes. "A movie, please. I've got zero energy for games. The only fun I can handle tonight will be in the form of flopping down and not moving a muscle. I'm going to have to roll out of this joint as it is, unless you have a wheel barrow handy, maybe parked outside."

"No such luck." Nick paid the tab, sidled up to Jeni, and put his arm around her shoulders in companionship. "I'll drive you to your car in a little while if you like, but first I'd like to go home for a few minutes, so I can shower and pack some things for the next few nights."

Jeni looked away then back at him. "How long will you be staying at my place?"

Nick pierced her with a meaningful glare, holding her eyes locked to his and his arm latched around her. "Could be days. Could be a week. Maybe more. Depends."

Jeni scowled. "Sometimes these cases never get solved, do they? What if it draws out like that?"

Nick tightened his grip on her. "I'll stick."

Jeni shivered. He looked like a man of his word, but even he couldn't camp out on her couch for the duration. She needed her privacy, not a babysitter. She shuddered. Okay, so maybe bodyguard better described what he considered his primary duty, but still. "I can't allow you to move in, Nick. I have a life. You must have one, too. You'll have to get back to it, eventually, and serial killers are tricky, from what you've said. You might never catch this one." She cringed. "I sure hope you find this guy though, and soon."

"We will, and I look at it this way. I'm protecting two of the creep's victims. What better way to do my job? Who better to question than the two of you?"

She nodded and let him lead her and Sarah, one on each arm, out of the restaurant.

Within minutes, Nick pulled into his driveway and got out of the car, as did Jeni and Sarah. A typical house in a typical neighborhood. Was Nick a typical man?

"Come in and make yourselves at home." Nick led the way, and they followed him. He let them in his door. "Ladies first, and have a seat in the living room if you like. I'll be a while. I'm gonna shower."

He left them standing there, and Jeni looked around her. Lonely. That's the only feeling the desolate place emanated. Nick's home—everything about the house—screamed barren. It was clean and comfortable, but with none of the extra amenities. Nothing revealed the man she believed Nick to be. Why? What did she not know about Nick Tarentino that made him not want to make his house into a home?

Nick lived alone, but he wasn't just alone. He was lonely. Or was he? Isn't this how she lived? Alone?

Jeni leaned toward Sarah and whispered, "Don't you sometimes wonder why men and women decorate so

differently? My house is frilly with a woman's touch. Nick's is the epitome of manliness and bland."

Sarah whispered back, "It's not just the decorations. Men and women think and act different, too. Macho pigs."

Jeni sucked in a breath. "All of them? Or just Franco?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "All of them from what I've seen. My dad was even worse than Franco. I should've listened to my mom when she told me to stay single forever."

"That's depressing. How am I gonna find the perfect husband someday if they're all jerks?" Jeni winked at Sarah who shrugged with a look of solemn acceptance.

"Good luck with that one." With a man like Franco to measure male actions to, no wonder Sarah saw all men as assholes.

"Looks like I'll need it." Jeni thought of Nick as the macho, masculine, police officer-type, the type that dated often. If Nick dated, there were certainly no signs of a woman in his home. No pictures. No color. Just a hollow, gutted-out aura reverberating through the house and echoing through her heart.

The mystifying expressions she'd seen flash across his face, like when she'd mentioned certain things and he'd turned white as a sheet, were now even more puzzling to her. He was an anomaly. That probably should've terrified her. Instead, it intrigued her. "I wonder why Nick isn't married. He must be about twenty-eight or so?"

Sarah twisted up her face as if in deep concentration. "Maybe he was." Jeni stared at her. "You mean divorced?" She gulped. "Or widowed?"

"Could be either one of those."

Jeni felt drawn to Nick, and she needed to know where the overwhelming sadness emanating from him originated. She sighed. Her innate sense of curiosity might be her undoing.

Jeni looked up when Nick entered his kitchen. Her coffee cup stopped mid-air. He cleaned up good. He was devastatingly handsome in the T-shirt and jeans. He was even more potent and intoxicating, and she couldn't imagine him any more gorgeous and sensuous than he was at this moment.

She flushed, stood, and turned toward the sink to rinse out her coffee cup, attempting to hide the effect he had on her. "I hope you don't mind. Sarah and I took the liberty of making coffee. Would you like some?"

She'd managed to keep her voice from wavering too much.

He gave her a full-blown smile, pearly whites and all, and her heart skipped a beat. "No problem at all. I'm glad to see you've made yourselves at home. And, yes, I'd love some coffee, please. We probably need some. None of us have gotten much sleep in the last few days. Plus, I'm about to hit you with a long, grueling list of questions, Sarah, when we get to Jen's."

The way he spoke her name, shortening it like that— Jen's—he made it sound like an endearment, as if they'd known each other forever and were long time friends. That worried her. Probably because she liked the idea. She didn't want to feel comfortable with Nick, but she had to admit she felt at ease in his presence. How could she not after what he'd done for her?

Sarah rolled her eyes and ignored the heat flooding her cheeks. "I'd rather continue with the girl talk."

Nick chuckled, the sound deep and robust. The laugh rippled through Jeni, breaking down some of her emotional barriers. "I bet you would, but we have business to attend to and a case to crack." He touched Sarah's shoulder. Jeni blinked, and the thrill in her heart subsided. Did he touch all women like that? He turned to Jeni, but his hand remained on Sarah's shoulder. "Let's go get your car, Jen."

"Where is it?" Sarah asked.

"At *Carpathia.* Where I was abducted last night." Sarah stilled and stood stock still, as if frozen in time. Jeni placed her hand on her other shoulder. "What is it?

As if fearing someone would overhear her, Sarah whispered, "I was leaving *Carpathia* when I was kidnapped. I was abducted down the street at a convenience store where I'd stopped in to get gas before heading home."

Nick blanched and dropped his hand from Sarah's arm. "Jeni was taken from the parking lot there, and you were attacked nearby. You might've been followed from the club."

He grabbed at his hair with both hands, frustration marring his gorgeous features. Jeni almost feared him, but he was the good guy, on her side. Thank goodness. He looked like he could tear a hole in someone.

"What the hell is going on? What does *Carpathia* have to do with anything? Is that the link?" Nick talked to himself, his furious features set in stone, except his jaw, which worked in a jerky manner. He'd stiffened and appeared to have delved into shock. What was it about the mention of *Carpathia* that did that to him? And what did it have to do with the fact both he and his home seemed lost and void?

Nick drew his hand through his slicked back hair, mussing it a bit, but damn, he still looked good. "That might be all we need to know. That might be the connection, *Carpathia*. I need to talk to the owners of the club and see if they're aware people are being kidnapped when they leave their place of business. They should have better security than that."

Was it the case that had Nick this distraught, or was there more to it? Jeni emptied Sarah's cup in the sink and cleaned the coffeemaker. Nick paced the floor while Jeni finished her task, then he grabbed her by the hand and glanced at Sarah. "Let's go. Someone will be at the club. It's 7:00 p.m., and it's Saturday night. We're going to get some answers."

* * * *

Nick grabbed his overnight bag and opened the door for Jeni and Sarah, releasing her hand to lock the door behind them. As he headed for the club, he drove too fast, but he seethed with fury at the whole situation and the irony of it.

Jeni gripped the dash in front of her as he rounded a bend in the road. "Slow down, Nick."

Nick didn't want to think about any of this anymore. "I want to find the SOB, throw the dumb shit in jail, and leave him there to rot."

The part frustrating and angering him the most was, in the end, he might catch this guy, but he'd never catch the gang members that'd killed his fiancée. He had to hold back an outburst of fury at the very thought.

"Okay, but do you have to kill us in the process?"

These women had no idea what went through his mind, or why he grew so furious. So what? He sure as hell didn't figure either one of them deserved an explanation to his sudden show of temper. It was none of their business, except, in a way, they were all in this together. He was their police protection, and their cases—Isabella's death and these women's abductions—were at least related by location.

They had something in common. A traumatic event caused them fear and stress. He preferred to bottle his feelings up inside, instead of sharing them with Jeni. Why should he talk about his past? Why should he even want to consider it?

Women. They always wanted to talk.

* * * *

Jeni heaved a sigh of relief, and Sarah relaxed in the back seat when Nick came to an abrupt halt in the parking lot of *Carpathia* after Jeni pointed out her lemon of a car. She'd gotten her extra key from home last night and pulled it out of her pocket. She could only the hope the jalopy started.

Jeni didn't hesitate. She'd had enough of Nick's harshness, and she wanted to go home. Wanting to get away from him for a while, she got out of his car and headed for hers. Sarah followed. Nick blocked the path to her car with the belligerence of a long-horned bull about to charge. "Follow me into the club." "Why?" She faced him down with the bravery of someone that knew a cop wouldn't attack her in broad daylight in the middle of a parking lot. Swallowing hard, she hoped she'd figured him right. Placing her hands on her hips and exhibiting her impatience in plain view, she braced herself for his tirade and beat him to it. "You obviously don't want us around, and you can do this on your own."

She tried to step around him, but he reached out and grabbed her upper arms "Look. Something could happen to if I let you stay out here alone. This'll only take a minute. I need to talk to the owners. I'm not letting you go home alone."

"I'm not alone. Sarah and I have each other, and we can call for police protection." Jeni glared at him. "Take your hands off me, Nick. You're hurting me."

Jeni didn't know what set him off, but she wouldn't let him treat her this way. She was her own person, independent. She could take care of herself like she had all her adult life and would again soon enough. He'd be gone, and she couldn't wait.

Nick jerked his hands away as if unaware he'd held her so tight. His face bore an expression of shame. "I'm sorry. *Mi dispiaci*." He inhaled deep and slow. "Please, wait out here for me if you'd rather not come inside. Don't go home, not alone, not like this."

If he put it that way, with that low, sexy voice of his, she'd probably do whatever he asked and then some. She caved and nodded. Nick strode away, and Jeni and Sarah sat in the car, waiting and feeling helpless. Nick wasn't gone long. He jogged up to them, and Jeni rolled down the window of her locked car door. "The owners aren't here and won't be here for a month. They're on some damn cruise ship vacation, but the manager will be here Monday. He's out of town for the weekend, and the assistant manager said they refused phone calls."

"You're a cop. Can't you make him give you the numbers?" "Yeah. With a court order which would take calling a judge and getting a writ. I might as well stick with the plan and interview the two of you then talk with the manager on Monday. If I need to, I can get a judge's order on Monday and force the phone number of the owners out of the manager."

Jeni leaned her head on her hands on the steering wheel. "Geez." She lifted her eyes to his. "The justice system sucks sometimes."

Nick nodded. "You got that right."

Jeni shook her head. "We're stuck for a couple of days. In limbo."

Nick ran a hand through his hair. "The trail will be colder than I'd like unless we can get somewhere through some other avenue, like questioning the other women."

"Unless the son of a bitch tries to kidnap one of the victims again and messes up. We're like a bunch of sitting ducks." Jeni blew out a breath, hoping that didn't happen to her or any of the others. "We'll get no answers tonight, then. Might as well go to my place."

Sarah rode with Jeni. Nick followed and parked behind Jeni in her driveway. He grabbed his overnight bag, hopped out of his car, and yanked Jeni's set of keys from her fingers. "Stay put. I'm going in to check things out. Wait. *Aspeta*."

He strode away. Fuming, Jeni did as he asked, and so did Sarah. "The last time we went through this process, Nick blew up in my face when I entered my own home without his permission. I don't want to deal with that again. I'll want to toss him out on his butt for bossing me around on my own turf if he snaps at me again."

"I know what you mean, but it's an everyday thing for me." Sarah scowled. Jeni held back a smile. Franco might treat Sarah like crap, but he hadn't taken her spirit. There was hope for her yet.

Glaring at her front door, Jeni crossed her arms and tapped her foot, impatience scorching her. A physical reaction accompanied every emotion she endured as of late.

After a short time, Nick opened the door, peeked out, and waved them in.

"Nick, make yourself at home." Jeni barged past him and waved him toward the living room. "Sarah, if you'll come with me, I'll show you where everything is, and you can freshen up. We're about the same size, so you can borrow some of my clothes until your sister gets here tomorrow. This way."

Jeni gave Nick a long, cold look. He gave her one right back. She slammed the door in his face. It'd be a long night a long few days, or weeks, or whatever—at this rate.

A grim thought indeed.

She sighed and showed Sarah the bathroom and linen closet.

Blasted man.

Consequences by Rebecca Savage

[Back to Table of Contents]

Eleven

Nick glared at the door that barred him from Jeni. She'd met Sarah a few hours ago, and they acted like they'd met years ago. Must be a girl thing. Whatever it was, Nick wanted to rip the door off the hinges.

Plopping down on the sofa, he flipped on the TV. He'd enjoyed being alone in the house with Jeni the night before. It'd been quiet and intimate.

Stupid?

Undoubtedly.

Nick fought an inward battle between his heart, his body, and his head. He didn't want to feel anything for Jeni, or anyone else, but he slid down a slippery slope, struggling with his emotions and his conscience. Trying to act normal, he'd joked with Jeni and Sarah, but he jumped out of his skin every time he touched Jeni. What was normal about that?

Nick blew out a gust of air. He had to get his spiraling guilt and anger under control. Mistrust filled Jeni's eyes when he reacted with an outburst of rage. He'd been living alone for so long he neglected taking other people's feelings into account. He'd have to get over that, or he'd lose the closeness and easy rapport he'd established with Jeni up to this point. Her smile was all he wanted see. It lit up her whole face and made him forget his own sadness, if only for a while. Nick relaxed, picturing her delicate features.

The cell phone at his hip rang, jolting him out of his ridiculous thought pattern. He flipped off the TV. He hadn't

been watching anyway. He growled the word into the receiver, "Yeah."

"Nick, you're on, man. Duty calls." Captain Bruno Martuscello wasn't the kind for mincing words.

A pang of apprehension sliced through Nick. "What now?"

"Franco Fratello, one of the victim's husbands. He's dead."

The air sucked out of Nick's lungs in a whoosh. "What? How?"

"Someone set fire to their house."

Nick sat up straight and rubbed a hand over his face. "You're sure? It was arson?"

"The neighbors across the street were having a barbecue. There was a loud explosion. They called 9-1-1 and went to check it out. They couldn't even get in the door. The whole place was full of smoke and going up in flames, just that quick."

Nick ran a hand through his hair and glanced at the closed door where Sarah remained locked away, unaware of her husband's gruesome fate. "The perp knew what he was doing."

"Right, and they found Franco's charred body on the couch. He was probably napping. The guy never knew what hit him. Your brother, John, is over there acting as fire chief. The arson unit is checking it out to see what kind of incendiary device caused the eruption. My guess is a gas bomb, like a Molotov Cocktail. You know, the kind they used during wartime to blow the tracks off tanks in the military." Martuscello's guesses were usually spot on. Nick grunted. "They're cheap, easy, destructive and effective, and it's hard to trace the products used to make them. Everything's over the counter. That makes the guy smart, no connections, no way to track him." Nick grimaced. "I'll have to break the news to Sarah. She shouldn't care about Franco after the way he treated her, but she probably does. Dr. Marti at emergency said Franco abused her, often." Nick sighed and raked a hand over his sweating forehead. He hated this part of his job. "Good thing she didn't go home with him."

Nick winced. He'd have to face another woman's pain. Investigation was his strong point. People skills weren't a part of his repertoire.

"She got a place to go?" Martuscello asked.

"Her sister's coming in the morning to pick her up. We're at Jeni's, thank God. She'll be able to comfort Sarah better than I could. I'll be down there ASAP." Nick started to hang up.

"Nick, there's more." The captain hesitated. "Jeni's name is spray painted in big black letters on Sarah's back porch and walkway. You might want to talk to Martinelli. She was first on scene. She can brief and write up the report."

"She was at the station this morning. What did she do? Pull a double shift?" Why would Martinelli do that spur of the moment? She was his partner, and they were working this case together, handling different aspects of it, yes, but still, she should've let him know what she was up to.

"She happened to be in the area and heard the call on her scanner. She recognized the address from the reports."

"Great." Nick stood. "Send someone to watch these ladies. Jeni doesn't need to know about her name at the crime scene, yet. I want someone posted outside, front and back. I'll head that way as soon as my relief gets here. Tell Martinelli to wait for me, so she can fill me in."

Nick didn't wait for a response, even if he basically hung up on his captain. He teetered on the verge of rage. What the hell was going on? Was Jeni involved in this somehow? Did she know what was going on? Did she know the perp? Was she covering for the sadistic pig? Some victims did that. Could he trust Jeni? Was this all a setup? Maybe that was why she'd been down there in the hole such a short time.

Nick didn't think that added up, but maybe he just didn't want it to be true. He liked this woman too much. He was too personally involved, staying with Jeni, protecting her, spending time with her.

Still, it didn't make any sense. Her terror and relief at the time of rescue seemed so genuine. How could she be a player in the kidnappings? Nick snarled. Maybe the perp—aka her partner—turned on her at the last minute and made her one of the victims. Or maybe it was a cover up to throw the police off the perp's trail and slow the track on the guy.

Nick shook his head, rubbing his temples. Sweet, innocent Jeni. She had to be...

Nick surged to his feet. He needed answers. Right now.

Nick banged on the bedroom door then stepped back across the room, not wanting to be anywhere near her when she came out. He needed distance, physically and emotionally. Jeni opened the door and stepped out, closing the door behind her with a soft click. She landed her hands on her hips. "Sarah's resting. What do you think you're doing? You've been angry since you heard *Carpathia* mentioned, again. You do this every time you hear the name of that club. This isn't my fault, Nick. Or Sarah's. What's wrong with you?"

Nick's pulse threatened to explode his heart. "My reaction to *Carpathia* is none of your business. I'm the one asking questions here. What the hell are you up to? What are you not telling me? How are you involved in this case?"

"You mean, except the fact I got myself beat over the head, kidnapped, and buried alive in a dark hole?" Jeni narrowed her eyes. "You're going about this the wrong way. Bullying me will get you nowhere fast."

"Franco is dead. Sarah's house is up in flames. *Your* name is written in big black letters on the back porch of her house." Nick paced, out of control. He should've kept that bit to himself. He should be professional. To hell with that. "Have you been lying to me all along? You can't possibly be as sweet and innocent as you seem to be. No one is. Are your parents really dead, or was that a lie, too? Why would you help some scumbag kidnap and attempt to murder six other women? Was he your partner? What were you going to get for your part in this crime? Did he turn on you? Tell me. I want to know. I need to know."

The blood drained from Jeni's cheeks, and her legs buckled. She slumped to the floor. When she went down, Nick tried to catch her, but he stood too far away. He dropped to her side and knelt next to her. Lifting her head and cradling it in his lap, he held her and rocked her. He had to be the biggest jerk in the world.

In truth, he knew Jeni had nothing to do with this, but the whole situation made him crazy. *She* made him crazy.

Sarah opened the door. The color fled from her face, and she jumped to the logical conclusion. "What did you do to her?" She railed at him. "Men are all alike. Franco hit me. You hit Jeni. What gives you the right?"

"I didn't hit her, Sarah. I'd never hit her. Or any other woman. Will you, please, get me a cold wet washcloth? She's in shock."

He couldn't tell Sarah about Franco, yet, not like this. He needed Jeni with him when he told Sarah her husband was dead, and her house and everything she owned was gone, destroyed by greedy flames.

Sarah turned on her heels and returned within seconds. Nick dabbed at Jeni's head, and she stirred, gained consciousness and blinked, her big lashes fluttering around her wide, round, dark eyes. She gave a feeble sound and pushed at him in a weak attempt to put space between them. "Get away from me, Nick."

Sarah hurled an accusing glare at him. Sarah went straight to the source. "Did he hit you, Jen? He said he didn't, but I don't believe him."

Sarah shook her head, fury in her wide eyes and disgust in her voice.

"No, he didn't hit me. He's just an inconsiderate idiot. He trusts *me* even less than you trust *him*." Jeni's voice was almost a whimper. He'd stung her. She'd trusted him to take

care of her, and he'd accused her of the very crime committed against her and bombarded her with a bunch of loaded questions.

Nick reached under her legs and back. He picked her up and carried her to the sofa. Jeni tried to push him away, but her effort was puny. Nick refused to let her go. He put her down on the couch and sat down next to her. Sarah lowered herself on the sofa next to Jeni, watchful and wary.

Jeni's eyes pierced him. How could he tell Sarah about Franco and her home?

Jeni didn't give him the chance to screw things up. She took charge. "Sarah." Jeni shifted and dug in, her hand on Sarah's. "Something has happened you need to know about."

Jeni stopped, and Nick held his breath. How would Sarah take the news? Sarah waited, anxiety and worry shining in her sorrowful eyes. Nick's chest tightened. He hated a woman's tears.

Sarah turned her hand to grasp Jeni's. "Did one of the other women die?"

"No, Sarah. Your house burned down. It was arson. Probably the same person who kidnapped us." Jeni rushed through the explanation then hesitated. Nick couldn't blame her. He wanted this over with, too, but how does a person speak such devastating words then watch someone fall apart?

Nick's entire body went cold. He'd hated the words he knew he'd hear next. He hated hearing them and saying them to his family after the fact, and he hated facing them now, even if the asshole deserved what he got. Sarah didn't. Isabella hadn't. Nick managed to sit with clenched fist while Jeni did his job for him. "Franco's dead."

Sarah sat there, a look of alarm, and something else, flashing across her solemn face. Nick tried to gauge Sarah's emotions. Sarah gripped Jeni's hands in hers. "You're sure? He's dead?"

"Yes." Jeni's eyes filled with tears, and a lone tear streamed down Sarah's face.

Sarah yanked her hands from Jeni's, put her face in her hands, and sobbed. Her whole body shuddered as she wept.

"I'm sorry, Sarah." Jeni clung to Sarah, her arms around Sarah's shaking shoulders. Sarah had loved Franco, and Nick empathized with her. He knew how it felt to lose someone. He'd loved and lost, and he missed Isabella to this day.

"I'm not," Sarah blasted out.

Jeni leaned back and gasped, wide eyed. Nick flinched.

Sarah fisted her hands on her thighs. "He was horrible to me. I loved him once, but, oh, God, he was a monster. Still, shouldn't I feel sorry for him? I don't. I'm relieved. I'm free." She dropped her head into her hands again and cried so hard her entire torso shook.

Jeni stared at Nick. Nick could do little but stare back.

Jeni's hand rested on Sarah's knee. Nick reached over and took Jeni's other hand in his. He'd had it so good all his life, until Isabella died. He'd always had his loving parents, his supportive brothers, and his friends at the station. Jeni lost her parents and admitted to having few friends and no husband or boyfriend. Sarah had been abused. Nick sighed. What an inconsiderate horse's ass he'd been. He looked into Jeni eyes and found no lingering anger. Only tenderness dwelled in the depths of her brilliant, glistening eyes. His heart would explode inside his chest with guilt and compassion if he didn't get a grip.

He linked his fingers with hers and sat there until Sarah calmed down and the spasms in her body stopped. Caressing the back of Jeni's fingers with his thumb, he wished he could hold her close and erase her pain. His own pain subsided when she entered his life. How odd. Such strange circumstance shouldn't help him heal, but understanding he wasn't alone in his misery somehow brought him back to life. His brothers had been trying to tell him life goes on, but he hadn't listened. Maybe he could figure out how to move on now. He took a deep breath. Maybe.

Finally, Sarah stopped crying, and Jeni led her into the bedroom. She came back out when he knocked on her door. Jeni's eyes held his. "What is it, Nick? I don't think any of us want to deal with questions tonight."

Nick cringed at the sadness in her eyes. "I've got to go." Jeni's eyes widened. "I have to check out the crime scene, fill out paperwork, and talk to Vick. Cop stuff." He smiled and laid a hand on her face. "You'll be fine. I have people watching the place."

Nick stepped to the door and let the officers in. He nodded and introduced them to Jeni. "This is Officer Michael Glandon and Officer Tessa Kaeding. They'll take good care of you. Rest easy."

Nick winked at her, and she offered a faint smile and a curt nod. She turned and went back into the bedroom. Nick stepped outside with the officers he knew well. "Watch the place like a hawk, Glandon. You, too, Kaeding. If a vehicle so much as turns onto this street or a pedestrian walks along it, I want to know, and I want them held for questioning."

The officers nodded in unison. Glandon and Kaeding were good. Nick worked with them before. They wouldn't let him down. He hoped.

Nick zoomed to the crime scene, calling Captain

Martuscello for directions. He knew the area. It was only minutes away. If the officers watching Jeni's place called, he could be back in a flash.

He breathed deep, hating the feeling of helplessness clawing at him. He had to get this guy, before it was too late.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Twelve

Nick's nostrils registered smoke way before he reached the scene. It sickened him to think Jeni's house could be the next pile of charred rubble, and it pissed him off to envision the last mass of smoke and flames he'd dealt with. He wanted blood. He could taste the desire for revenge. The guy's head lopped off would be a good start.

"What's up, Vick? What do we know?"

Vick spat on the ground. She did that more than any man he'd ever met and chewed tobacco with the best of them. She ought to invest in the damn stuff. Disgusting habit. "Not much. Your brother's checking out the origin of the fire. We're working with forensics." She eyed him. "What about you? Find out anything new today?"

Nick gave a brisk nod. "I got a lead with *Carpathia,* but there's a glitch." Nick studied Vick's expression. Her features were set, hardened somehow. Why the rigidity? She was like that most of the time, but tonight she reeked of tension. "Why did someone write Jeni's name on the sidewalk?"

Vick screwed up her face into an odd looking scowl and shrugged. "Maybe it was only accidental homicide. Maybe the perp didn't know Franco remained in the house."

"Either way, Franco's dead, and the fire-starter was probably after Sarah, his original prey." Nick measured Vick. She was usually a bit more informative. She had an eye for details and enjoyed filling him in on everything just to show him she could. Why was she less than chatty tonight? She hadn't even attempted to flirt with him. "I'm no closer to solving the case than I was yesterday."

Vick narrowed her eyes. "*We're* no closer, you mean. Don't forget about me, *partner.*"

Nick grinned. "Sorry, Vick. Didn't mean to. I have a lot on my mind."

Vick touched him and moved in close. He cringed. So much for lack of flirtation. He'd have to talk to her about this touchy feely thing. He wanted professionalism from her. That's it. Why couldn't she get that?

Vick used her sultry voice, but it did nothing for him. "Don't worry yourself about it, Nick. It'll be all right. We'll get the guy."

"Yeah." Nick pulled away and walked off. "I'm gonna take pictures, record info, and try to get a feel for the scene."

"I already did that, Nick."

"Fine." He didn't need Vick pawing at him. Grabbing his camera from his glove box, he started toward the mess that used to be a home but would hopefully reveal evidence he could use to solve this case. "I'll take more. We can compare notes later."

Two exhausting hours passed before Nick slipped into Jeni's home and faced the officers he'd left in charge. "You can go back to work. Thanks."

Glandon checked his watch. "We're headed home. Shift's over. We worked a swing shift. Ended an hour ago."

"Sorry you got stuck on overtime."

Kaeding shook her head. "No problem. Gotta take your time when you deal with things like this."

Nick always took his time. He liked to be thorough, and he had no one at home to miss him when he worked late. This time though, he'd wanted to get away from the scene of the crime ASAP. He feared for Jeni's life and needed to be here protecting her. He'd taken his time, wanting to discover what he could at the scene of the crime. He'd given forensics a hard time and pushed his brother John, fireman extraordinaire, for prompt answers. He'd been short with his Captain Martuscello and received a stern look. He'd have to eat crow if he didn't straighten up and calm down, but calm wasn't in his emotional realm of possibilities right now.

Vick had set him off on a tangent when she'd pawed him for about the tenth time. "Back off, Vick. You need to learn to keep your hands to yourself."

Her eyes had sparked, and her face turned beet red. "Screw you, Nick."

Nick would've sworn she'd breathed fire. She stomped away, calling him every name in the book, and then some.

Nick drifted off to a fitful sleep and woke up to the sounds of laughter, soft voices, and dishes clattering in the kitchen. The aroma of breakfast cooking reached his senses, and he headed to the bathroom for a shower, slipping into Jeni's bedroom without asking and taking the bag he'd packed the night before with him. Surely she wouldn't begrudge him a shower. It'd be another long and tiresome day.

He stepped into the kitchen minutes later, and both heads turned. Jeni lowered her eyes. "Morning."

"Morning, Officer Tarentino." Sarah wore what Nick would've sworn was a half-smile, half-smirk. What was the woman thinking?

"Morning." He touched Sarah's arm. "Call me Nick."

Sarah nodded and blushed. Jeni scooped him up some breakfast. "Eat. It's getting cold."

So was she. She barely looked at him as he dug into his breakfast. "Thanks."

Jeni nodded and dipped her hands into the sink filled with soap suds and dirty pots and pans. "Do you like it?"

Nick held back a grin. He could console her. It'd be easy. "Who doesn't like quiche?"

Jeni shrugged. "Lots of people. Men generally think it's a girly dish and turn their noses up at it."

Nick shook his head and talked with his mouth full. "Not me. Isabella used to make it and..."

He nearly choked on that comment. He'd actually spoken Isabella's name aloud in front of near strangers, something he hadn't done in almost a year, except when he threatened her killers and other bad people with bodily harm or jail time in reference to why he did his job.

Jeni stopped washing dishes and turned to him. Sarah stared at him. He lowered his head and shoved food in his mouth to shut himself up. How did Jeni get him to open up like that? She hadn't even tried.

Shit. Was he turning into a drama queen and joining in with these women for ridiculous girl talk?

Jeni went back to washing dishes, and Sarah dried. When Nick finished, he washed his own plate. Jeni and Sarah returned to the safe haven of the bedroom, probably to escape his gruffness and prepare for Sarah's sister Trish's arrival.

Trish picked Sarah up at about 10:00 a.m. There were hugs all around, and tears from the women. Nick did his best to ignore and not get caught up in the emotion. Strange how stressful situations brought people so close together so quickly.

After Sarah's reluctant departure, Nick glanced at Jeni. "Let's head for the hospital. I need more answers, and I want to talk to the other victims to see if they'd been to *Carpathia* as well."

Jeni nodded and followed him to his car, still sniffling after Sarah's leaving. Nick wanted to distract her with facts of the case, instead of allowing her worry about Sarah, herself, or the others, and what was in store for them. "I have a gut feeling." *Not to mention a hollow pit above my churning intestines*. "*Carpathia* is the connecting link, somehow, but I need to know how, and why."

"It's only Sunday, and you can't talk to the manager of the club until tomorrow. How can we find anything out before then?" Jeni found a tissue in his glove compartment and blew her nose. Nick held back a grin. She obviously could care less about how lady-like that didn't sound.

"I despise weekends for this very reason. It's downtime when I'm on the hunt for a criminal, and a hot trail could turn into a cold dead end overnight. I detest that."

"Can't say I blame you."

Nick turned into the parking lot in front of emergency, got out, and came around to assist Jeni. She beat him to it when she opened her own door and stepped out, but she took his hand when he offered it and allowed him to link his fingers in hers. He needed the contact, even if she didn't. He gripped her hand, and she responded in kind. Leading her through the double glass doors of the ER, he headed for the information desk.

The nurse in charge of the information desk was new, but Karen winked at her. "It's okay, Katie. Help Nick any way you can. He's here about the manhole victims." Karen looked at Nick. "We sort of gave them that title since the press is a constant presence, and we don't want to use names in case they overhear."

"Thanks, Karen. I bet you're sick of the vultures calling and stopping by." He winked. "You tired of me yet?"

"No way, big guy." Karen whirled around and took off with a clipboard in her hand and probably a mission on her mind. The woman was all energy and business mixed with love and care. Every nurse should be like her.

"What can you tell me about the remaining victims, Katie?"

"Three of them are ready to leave the hospital, so they'll be able to answer questions. I'll jot down their room numbers."

"Thanks, Katie, you're a doll."

Katie grinned wide and scribbled on a notepad. "Karen warned me about you and your brothers. She said you're a bunch of sweet talkers." Nick chuckled and flicked the end of her pointy nose with a finger. "Gets us what we want."

"You're even more wicked than Karen said, but that's not what gets you what you want. From what I hear, you're good men. The best. So you deserve the best."

Katie glanced at Jeni then drew her gaze back to Nick. Nick winced. Uh, oh, here it comes. Matchmaking. Karen talked way too much apparently.

Nick didn't give Katie the chance to make a fool out of him. He picked up the piece of paper Katie scrawled room numbers on, tucked the files he'd brought with him from his office under his arm, grabbed Jeni's hand, and ran like hell ... well, actually, he walked through the ER to the elevator and to the women's recovery rooms, but he sure as hell wanted to run.

He deposited Jeni in the waiting room and questioned each of the ladies on their whereabouts on the evenings of their abductions. All of the women, at least the ones able to answer his questions, had been abducted either near *Carpathia*, or at their homes or elsewhere after leaving *Carpathia*.

Jeni stood when he walked down the hall towards her.

He stopped inches from her. "*Carpathia* is the connecting link."

She released the breath she'd been holding and sank down on her seat. She looked relieved and on the verge of tears. He couldn't blame her. One part of the puzzle had been solved as far as he was concerned.

Nick needed a break, and so did Jeni. He wanted to relax for awhile and spend some time with her. He'd talked to the victims. It would take him no time to use his notes to write up reports. So now what?

It was Sunday, the day of rest, and he couldn't talk to the manager until tomorrow, and who knew when he'd get a hold of the owners?

Still, Nick never relaxed. He hadn't had much practice with that aspect of his life since Isabella's death. He had priorities and very little time to play.

From what Jeni had told him of her lifestyle, she didn't enjoy much downtime, either. So, how would he convince her that *they*, of all people, should spend the day *together*, relaxing, something neither of them was good at?

* * * *

Jeni knew Nick must be thinking about the case and *Carpathia.* He displayed a far off look in his eyes, one of deep concentration, probably considering how to approach the case and what to do next. It wasn't quite the same look he'd had when he'd become enraged at the mention of the club's name that first time. That was a plus. That look had frightened her to death.

"What now?" she asked.

Nick jumped as if she'd poked him in the ribs. "How about going to my brother's house? Sal and his wife, Lori, would love to have us. We could barbeque. Knowing Lori, she'll call my other brother, John, and ask him and his wife, Sherri, over, too, and ... What?"

"What are you talking about? I can't crash a family outing like that."

"You wouldn't be crashing anything. They don't even know *I'm* coming yet."

"You've lost your marbles. What are you going to do? Call them up and say ... what? 'Hey, we're on our way. Start cooking.'"

Nick shrugged. "Sure. They love this kind of thing, and I know what you're thinking, that you'd be unwelcome. Trust me, my whole family is all about welcome, and barbecues, and get-togethers. If my parents, Maria and Giovanni, weren't on a cruise, they'd show up, too." He lowered his voice and took her hand in his. Drilling her with a glare that had her pulse skipping a beat, he ran his thumb over her fingers, sending a shiver through her humming body.

"Oh my gosh, you're like my parents. Fly by the seat of your pants, spur of the moment, party hardy." Jeni pulled her hand away. She couldn't breathe. Reacting to him this way unnerved her. She was attracted to someone who resembled her parents on too many levels. No wonder he'd pointed out how well they'd raised her, saying they couldn't be all that bad. He'd been raised the same way. Or had he?

Nick chuckled and captured her hand again. "Being like your parents can't be all bad, but I'm not like that. I'm anal if you ask the rest of the crew at the station." He kissed her hand. "I'm calling. We're going. We both need to think about something besides murder and mayhem. Please, spend some time with me today. Okay?"

She melted. He practically pleaded. The man she'd thought of as a macho brute cop gazed at her with puppy dog eyes and kissed the back of her hand like a gentlemen out of the middle ages of chivalry and propriety. Why had he done that? She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Okay. I'll go. Thank you."

Nick flashed a wide grin, whipped out his cell, and dialed the number. "Sal, I'm coming over. About 12:30. I'm bringing someone. Yeah, a woman. Yeah, really."

Nick kept talking, planning, and detailing. As he did so, he glanced sideways at Jeni, who grew more uncomfortable with this situation by the second. Nick looked annoyed. His irritation wasn't directed at her, though. Maybe his brother had ticked him off.

Great start. She already made a bad impression by allowing Nick to drag her along and invite herself to a family outing. What must his family think? Nick hung up and smiled with that perfect set of bright white teeth. "We're on, but don't let them scare you off with their matchmaking techniques. They've been trying to hook me up with someone for long time. You'll be fresh meat, and they'll try to lure you in, but you don't have to bite. I haven't."

Jeni tried a ghost of smile. "Fabulous. Can't wait."

Nick whistled a chipper tune, and all traces of grumpiness disappeared. He carried a weight on his shoulders, but he hid it now. She didn't know his secret yet, but there was more to him than a police officer trying to solve her case. He hated the mention of *Carpathia*. He hated the place itself. She desperately wanted to know why, but she wouldn't ask him and ruin his good mood.

On the interstate, he beamed at her and reached over and turned on the radio, searching out an 80's station. He sang

along, tapping his hand on the steering wheel, keeping time with the upbeat rhythm. Unbelievable.

And contagious. More lighthearted than her usual gray, studious-to-the-exception-of-all-else self, Jeni wouldn't admit her cheerfulness had anything to do with the man sitting next to her, not in a million years. If she did, she might also have to admit she wanted more than the manuscript collections dust covered and filled with files and files, boxes and boxes, of primary documents she could use for her dissertation awaiting her at Wash-U. Shouldn't that be enough to make her happy until the time came to find the perfect man?

Jeni glanced at Nick. Exactly what did she think the perfect man was? She ran her eyes over Nick as he leaned over and turned the radio down. She never would've described the perfect man in such a fashion, but since she'd met the man next to her, her idea of perfection had changed. She trembled. Trouble loomed on the horizon.

Trouble? Nick's magnificent eyes were filled with it. "Tell me about yourself, Jen."

Jeni smirked. "I thought you said we were going to relax. Can you relax and play policeman at the same time?"

"I don't mean like that. Tell me about *you*. What do you like to do, other than study? Where are you from, other than Italy and your present address? What were your parents like, other than irresponsible hippies?" His eyes gleamed.

Her heart stuttered then kicked up a notch. This relaxing and enjoying herself thing was terrorizing. "I like to study. It's what I do for fun. Who needs alcohol? I live in a permanent high, focusing on school work and impressing my fellow academics."

She stiffened when Nick shook his head. "I read, too, Jen, but I doubt I'd think the material you read could be considered a good time. Stephen King probably isn't on your TBR list."

"Not quite. Nonfiction is the in thing with my crowd." Nick chuckled. "Where did you live most of your life?"

"A small town called Steelville, the floating capital of the world, or so they say. It was a great place to go to high school and for my parents to spend their golden years, not that they considered themselves old, but they looked forward to staying in Steelville forever. It's a beautiful, quaint, nostalgic little town." Jeni shivered at the bad memories harbored there, but she drew herself up and tried to focus on the good parts. "My mom created art, and my dad did, too, in a way, doing construction."

"So you enjoyed going to school there?"

"Sure. I earned excellent grades all my life, despite my upraising." Jeni grinned, finally beginning to accept her parents for what they were. If Nick could, why couldn't she? "On graduation day, I kept watching for them to show up. They'd gone to St. Louis, and I expected them to be back on time. They wanted pictures before and after I graduated. As the music started, and the program began, I got so pissed. I figured it was one more irresponsible thing they'd pulled. They did it all the time. They'd be on their way to an event, and they'd pull over at a bar for a drink or check out a flea market. It irked me to no end." She shuddered. "They never came. The end of the ceremony came, and they weren't there. I knew something was up. They wouldn't have missed the whole thing, even if they had stopped for a drink." Jeni wrapped her arms around her middle. "They wouldn't have died if they hadn't been on their way to see me graduate."

Nick pulled to the side of the road.

"What are you doing?" Jeni glanced all around her. Had he seen something, heard something?

Nick turned to face her and put his hand on hers. "I thought we talked about this. I know what guilt can do to a person, and I can't sit by and let you do this to yourself. Your parents loved you, and there's no way they would've missed your graduation if they could've helped it, but their deaths weren't your fault."

Tears stung her eyes. Nick leaned closer. "The gang members that killed your parents are to blame, not you, not in any way, shape or form. You know that, right?"

He turned a little more, angling his body so he faced her. Their bodies were very close, almost touching. Placing his fingers under her chin, he lifted her face toward him. "Right?"

Their bodies were *too* close. His body heat flowed through his fingertips and into her, and her pulse skidded to a halt. He could lean in and kiss her, or she could do the same. She wanted to, but her breath hitched at the very idea. She'd never been that forward in her sheltered life.

Like two magnets, their mouths came together. Their lips brushed, caressing, just enough for her to know she wanted more. Lifting his hand, he pushed her hair back from her face and gazed into her eyes, his own darkening to crystal ebony. His smoldering stare told her multitudes and scared the bejeebies out of her.

Nick pulled back. Had he seen something in her eyes that made him move away? He held back. Why didn't he kiss her again? Didn't he want to?

Disappointment rammed into her chest. They were in the middle of the interstate, for heaven's sake. It'd be a long, tension-filled day if she couldn't get some distance between them and get herself back on track. Her body shouldn't have reacted in such a way. She didn't need this kind of trouble. She needed her degree, and sanity, and stability. Nick didn't represent any of those things.

Nick cleared his throat. His voice shook when he spoke. "We're almost there. They'll be expecting us. We'd better get going."

Nick pulled onto the highway. Jeni prayed his family couldn't tell she'd turned into a wanton woman in the middle of the road. Jeni blinked back the tears to keep them from falling and tried to breathe and think. How could a simple kiss and the heated touch of any man do that to a woman? All the nerve endings in her screaming body slammed every bit of feeling straight to her gut, then lower, all the way to her aching core.

She flushed thinking about it and hoped Nick didn't notice. He ignored her at present. That was a good thing. He'd turned the music back up, but didn't sing. He stared straight ahead and gripped the wheel with white knuckles. Jeni hoped he couldn't hear her unsteady breathing and see her flaming, red cheeks. She knew they were red. They were hotter than Hades to her touch.

This would be a long day.

They arrived at Sal's house, and Nick jumped out. "Hold on."

He came around to her side and opened her door, taking her hand in his and linking his fingers in hers. The door to the house opened, and Sal came out, carrying a small boy on his shoulders. Sal stopped in his tracks and glanced down at Nick and Jeni's joined hands. He looked up at Nick with a sideways grin on his face. "Hey, Nick, how goes it?"

"Good, Sal, but it'd be better if this case were solved. Did John get any leads from the investigation at the fire scene at Sarah's yet?"

Business talk. Shop talk. That's good. We can do that. Nothing personal. All the better for Jeni's jittery nerves and tumultuous body.

"Nothin' yet, bro. He's working on it, along with the arson unit." Sal turned to Jeni. "He's not much for small talk, is he?"

Nick blushed. Yes, blushed. Incredible. He wrapped an arm around Jeni's waist and tugged her to him. Even more incredible. "Sorry, man. I want to get this over with, I guess."

Sal offered Jeni a hand with a genuine, sturdy handshake. "I know we met but not officially, so I'm Sal, and this thing on my shoulders is my bratty kid, Tristin."

Sal reached up and tickled the little boy. Tristin giggled and squealed. "Stop, Daddy, stop."

"Hi, Tristin."

"Hi."

"I hope we're not imposing, Sal, but Nick said it'd be fine for us to visit."

Sal smiled, all sweetness and charm, like his little brother. "Of course, you're welcome, and we do this sort of thing all the time. No problem. Let's go meet and greet the rest of the crew." Sal angled toward the side of the house. "They're out back, firing up the grill."

Rounding the corner of the house, Jeni saw what looked like what she imagined a typical family outing would be. Sal walked up and kissed a beautiful blonde woman with shortcropped hair, tall, sleek, and very sexy. The epitome of a man's wet dream, even if Jeni did say so herself. Jeni felt mediocre compared to her. Was this woman what Nick wanted in a woman, too? All gorgeous and curvaceous. Mother Nature had neglected that part of Jeni's torso. Fivefoot and little more, she'd never had to worry about rejecting the boys. They hadn't bothered with her. Her mom had told her she scared them off, but Jeni didn't think that was the problem. They'd focused on her well-endowed friends, but she hadn't given a damn, until now. Yep. Trouble.

Sal made the rounds. "This is my wife, Lori. It's her job to keep me in line."

Lori stretched out both hands, one under and one over Jeni's trembling fingers. Lori held on with an odd look in her eyes that consisted of more than curiosity. Sincere warmth emanated from her and inched its way into Jeni's pounding heart. Lori's words nearly brought tears to Jeni's eyes. "It is absolutely great to meet you. Any friend of Nick's is a friend of ours. Make yourself at home." Jeni hadn't expected such a tender handshake or welcome greeting. She tried to accept and return it, and not look confused. Where had all this sincerity come from? They didn't know her at all, and she'd never met Lori, but she wore the same kind of perfume Officer Martinelli did. Jeni hid a smile. She wouldn't hold it against Lori, her taste in perfume, especially since she didn't pour it on like Martinelli did. "Thank you."

Sal continued with the introductions. "You know John, of course."

Jeni nodded. "Sort of. Hi, John."

John shook her hand and placed an arm around the shoulders of the woman next to him. "This is my wife, Sherri."

Sal nudged John's ribs. "His very round wife, Sherri."

Sherri rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm so fat I might give birth any minute."

Nick grinned and put his hand on Sherri's belly. "Looks like it."

Sherri poked him in the ribs with her trigger finger. "Thanks, Sal and Nick, you slugs. You boys better hope this baby doesn't pop out 'any minute'. It could ruin the barbeque." She turned to Jeni. "Nice to meet you, Jen, but we'll have to talk about your choice of company. Hanging out with Nick might not be such a good idea." She winked. "Don't worry. I'm not due for several weeks, so no worries."

Sherri's eyes twinkled with mischief, adoration and love. They razzed each other, but they were obviously one big happy family. Lori took Jeni's arm to lead her inside. "Why don't you come inside with us? We'll throw together a salad and a few side dishes while these animals barbeque and pride themselves on being the supreme beings of the human race."

Nick threw up his arm in an exaggerated flail. "Great. That means there'll be more girl talk and plenty of man bashing."

Jeni wanted to kick her own rear end when she walked away but looked back at Nick with longing. She didn't like leaving him, but since when did she need someone to be at her side at a party? She'd been to more functions than she could count. She was an independent woman. She didn't need him by her side.

Besides, she was better with women when it came to conversation and camaraderie, except in the intellectual arena. Then she made it her sole purpose to show the men of the faculty how smart she was. She wanted to work with them someday, so they needed to know the extent of her intelligence and how limitless her ambition was.

These women didn't care about that. They wanted to know what went on between her and Nick. She'd have to assure them nothing went on between them. Just as soon as she got her healthy dose of lust back under wraps.

Hearing the conversation outside before she closed the door did nothing to steady her nerves.

"Whew." Sal whistled, shooting a suggestive look at John. "Did you see that? Sparks flew."

"What are you talking about?" Nick sounded nonchalant. "You like her, don't you?" Sal asked Nick, quietly, gently. "Yeah, I like her, but that's it. I'm not getting involved with anyone again, ever. Besides, she doesn't want anything to do with me. She's working on her PhD in History at Wash-U. So lay off," Nick warned.

"Okay, bro, whatever you say." John chuckled and patted Nick good-naturedly on the shoulder and handed him a lemonade.

Jeni closed her eyes, opened them, and clicked the door closed. She'd have to deal with all that mess later. She took a deep breath and followed the ladies into the kitchen, otherwise known as girl-talk heaven. Lori and Sherri chattered away and asked Jeni all about herself. They were being protective and finding out why the heck Jeni came here with Nick and if she deserved to be with him.

Nick's hand-holding in front of his family had sent the wrong message. Why had he held her hand like that? What was he up to? Did he realize he'd held her hand like they were a couple? No wonder his brother had asked him the probing question he had.

Jeni ended a round of twenty questions resembling the Spanish Inquisition, just a little different from the one Nick put her through. She smiled and looked from Lori to Sherri. "Do you grill all the women Nick brings to meet you like this, or is it just me?"

Lori and Sherri stilled, then glanced at each other. They turned to Jeni, and the kitchen grew deathly quiet and shrank in size, going from intimate and homey to way too small. Jeni blushed, self-consciousness seeping into her pores. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by that. I was just..." Lori touched her arm. "No, you don't understand. We weren't offended. It's just ... Nick hasn't brought anyone here since..." Lori hesitated. "For over a year."

Lori dropped her hand, and her shimmering eyes gave Jeni the distinct impression Lori said more than she thought she should've. "Why not?"

Lori blinked. "What?"

"Why hasn't Nick brought anyone to meet you for so long?" What was he hiding? "Surely someone as handsome as Nick dates often." Jeni tried for an easy laugh. "Of course, today he's stuck with me as my great protector, and he wanted to see his family and kill two birds with one stone, so to speak, but still. I'm sure I'm not the only girl he brings home to meet the folks."

Lori and Sherri exchanged a tension-filled glance. What was Nick's secret? What were these women not telling her?

Lori took a deep breath. "Let's save this conversation for another day. How about we take some glasses of lemonade to the guys? They're probably ready for refills."

And that was that.

So much for female unity and all that damn girl talk.

* * * *

Nick watched Jeni all afternoon, keeping tabs on her every move. He couldn't stop ogling her. He hoped his family didn't notice the way he eyed her, or the bulge in his pants. She ate barbeque with him and his family, outside on the patio, where he'd spent so many hours enjoying himself. She played volleyball in the backyard, where he'd done the same, while Sal and Lori rolled around on the ground and entertained their young son.

Jeni seemed to be having a good time, laughing more than he'd seen her do since he'd met her, and her beautiful, gleaming smile shone bright. He hadn't seen enough of that smile. He sighed. He'd finally gotten her to relax, and he'd relaxed, too. Something he'd needed to do for a long time, he admitted with stubborn reluctance, and his family accepted her, as they would anyone he brought home with him, not that he did that anymore.

Jeni went inside, excusing herself to go to the restroom. A few minutes later, he followed her and bumped into her as she came down the hallway on her way back outside. Their bodies touched in the narrow hallway, and he took her hands in his. He leaned his forehead against hers. "See? This relaxing thing isn't so bad, is it?"

"No," Jeni breathed out, her body frozen, except for that slight tremor running through her torso and into his. He trembled, too, at the acknowledgement of it.

Touching her, feeling her warm, soft body so close to his, the flirtatious contact wasn't helping him to relax. The blood pumped through his fast-flowing veins and caused his temperature to rise at least ten unbearable degrees. He wasn't breathing properly. All he could think about was that tentative kiss in the car on the way over, and the fact his body was almost full length plumb with hers, and on high alert.

He leaned into her, absorbing her body heat. He reveled in her essence, raised his forehead from hers, and stared at her lips. She licked them and stared at his. His mouth went dry, and he touched his hand to her throat. She bit her bottom lip, and her pulse hammered under his thumb, her quickening heartbeat beating strong and wild at the base of her neck. Her heavy breathing echoed his belabored intake and ragged release of air. Her chest rose and fell beneath his hand, slow and with difficulty. His raspy breath wouldn't be normal again as long as he connected with her body.

He backed off, easing away. She glanced down the hall, pulled her hands from his, and turned to join the others outside. He stood there, bracing his head against the wall, berating himself and catching his breath. What would he do about what he felt for the first time in a year? Lately, he'd spent more time thinking about another woman than he had about Isabella. He'd felt free and relaxed today, enjoying himself with Jeni. At this moment, he wasn't even sure if he felt sorry about that or not, but he did know how good Jeni felt in his arms.

He'd begun to think Isabella would want him to be happy. Was that a mistake?

Jeni made him happy. Was that an illusion? He'd have to think about that. Was that wrong? Should he act on it, too? Would that be wise?

* * * *

Jeni played volleyball with Nick and his family until it got too dark to see, then they said their goodbyes.

Sherri hugged Jeni. "Be sure to come back. You're welcome anytime."

Jeni nodded, tears stinging the backs of her eyes. Would she see them again? "Thank you all for today." Lori hugged her close. "It's not goodbye. It's *see ya later.*"

Sal and John winked, shook her hand, and slugged Nick on each arm in a show of brotherhood. Jeni had been an only child and had never had friends or family treat her the way she'd seen Nick's family interact today. She'd missed out on a vital part of life and happiness. Maybe getting her PhD shouldn't be the most important thing in her life. Maybe family should.

Could she change her lifestyle and the way she'd been thinking her entire adult life? Should she seek true happiness, whatever that was?

Nick made her happy. She'd have to think about that. But should she act on it, too? [Back to Table of Contents]

Thirteen

Nick pulled into Jeni's driveway and made a quick safety check of her house before allowing her to enter her own domain. Jeni wanted Nick to kiss her again, and more. How could she approach him? She had no idea how to let a man know she wanted a kiss, or anything else for that matter. What if Nick wouldn't want to kiss her again? What if he thought her too forward? Maybe the intimacy they'd shared so far was a fluke. Maybe he'd felt sorry for her in this weary situation.

She'd wait for him to make a move. She didn't know the first thing about coming onto a man and shouldn't be thinking along those lines anyway. "I'm going to take a quick shower and freshen up. Then you can take a turn if you'd like."

"Sounds good." Nick raked his eyes up and down her body. He appeared to have a hard time breathing, his Adam's apple bobbed, and if the look in his eyes was any indication, it might be a good sign he wanted to kiss her again.

* * * *

All Nick could envision was Jeni, naked, water running over her ample breasts and nice curves. He'd take a cold shower when it was his turn, just to keep his hands off her.

She'd let him kiss her before, but she'd been vulnerable and crying, and he'd taken advantage of her turbulent emotions. No way would she let it happen again, and a kiss wouldn't be enough at this unbearable point. If he got his mouth and hands on her, he'd want more.

He should back off. Self-imposed celibacy wasn't making things any easier. He was randy as a teenager in the back seat of his father's station wagon. Lack of sex for over a year would do that to a guy, but he had no right to take advantage of someone as innocent and fragile as Jeni.

Dio. She took his breath away as she came through her bedroom door with a towel wrapped around her long hair and rolled up on top her head. Wearing a short, silky bath robe, and nothing on her feet, she made him hotter and harder than anyone ever had, just by being herself, soft, beautiful ... *bellisima* ... Jeni. What the hell was she trying to do to him?

Nick choked down the clog in his throat, closed his eyes, and got up to take his shower, a cold one, very cold.

After his roiling body chilled, and he dressed in a pair of shorts to sleep in, he headed for the living room, hoping Jeni had gone to bed already, so he could avoid her. No such luck. Jeni sat on the sofa, her bare feet curled up under her, reading a magazine. He sucked in a shallow breath as she looked up at him from under thick eyelashes and bit her lip. So much for a cold shower. He never should've worn shorts. Bad news.

She stood and made a slow trek towards him, stopping within mere inches of his reach. Gazing into his eyes, she licked her lips. Nick's stare dropped from her beautiful eyes to her enticing mouth. He should either bolt out the door, or tell her to give him some space. If not, he'd lose his sanity, and his barely restrained control. His whole body ached with tension, and his blood boiled with anticipation. He'd turned hard from the intense desire pulsing through his enflamed body with her this close to him, tempting him, traumatizing him beyond comprehension.

He jolted when she touched him, raking her finger tips on each side of his rib cage. Hissing in a stunned gasp, he held his breath and froze to the spot for fear of making the wrong move. Unable to release air through his clogged passage, he waited. She lifted hers eyes to his and touched his bottom lip with her finger. He huffed his breath out, and the sound whistled between his clenched teeth. He might explode right here in front of her if she didn't back off.

Jeni leaned her head on his chest, reached her hands around his waist, and glided her fingertips up to his shoulders. Immobilized except for the involuntary flexing of his muscles jumping, he closed his eyes and clenched his fists. What next? What did Jeni want from him? How much could he take before going mad? Should he give in to his desire and ravish her? Could he have tonight then give her up? Could he do that do Isabella's memory?

Jeni brought her fingers scraping down his back, rasping her short nails down his rigid backbone. His body lurched forward at the erotic movement. Heat rippled through his overly-sensitized body from the feel of her gentle but strong hands on his traumatized torso. Her caresses rocked him and weakened his knees. He nearly collapsed with testosterone overload.

Unable to resist, Nick closed his arms around her, leaving one hand splayed on the small of her waist at her back. Pulling her head back roughly, he wrapped his fingers in her long, soft hair and looked her straight in the eyes. "Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?"

"No. Not really. All I know is I want you to kiss me. I want you to show me what I'm doing to you. I know what you're doing to me, and I want you to touch me." Jeni's voice shook and reverberated through him. The low, seductive sound of it soothed his soul.

Nick lost his last bit of resistance and gave in to the need to kiss her. With a groan, he pulled her to him, taking her mouth with his, softly, at first. His body hardened against hers, and he deepened the kiss, tasting her, trying not to devour her. She moaned in response, and the needy, guttural sound tore at him. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, and she opened to him in silent invitation.

Satisfying his hunger by attempting to consume her sweet mouth, he pushed her back against the wall and mimicked the act of lovemaking he'd rather be engaged in. His chest heaved, and his pulse raced. He drove his tongue between her lips then sucked on her tongue when she responded in kind. She tasted good, she felt better, and this dance created a swirling fire within him like no other he'd ever experienced.

Nick's world tilted beyond thinking and reasoning. His body wanted to get closer to her, become part of her, and melt into her.

"I want you, Nick. Please. Por favor."

He couldn't believe his pounding ears, but it was all the encouragement he needed. Lifting her and carrying her to her bed, he laid her down as gentle as he could. He'd take this as slow as possible, so he wouldn't frighten her, but he was close to losing control. He didn't know how much more he could take before that last thread of restraint snapped, and he thrust inside her like a crazed lunatic and took her with the madness of a man who hadn't been with a woman for far too long.

She reached for his hand as he stood over her, looking at her, admiring her curves and beauty. How had he gotten so lucky?

She linked her fingers in his and tugged him toward her. He lay beside her and rolled her to her side away from him, untying her robe and loosening it with one hand. Bringing the silk down over her shoulders, he exposed her enticing breasts. The sleek robe glided the rest of the way off her gorgeous body as she moved against him. He threw the inhibiting material to the floor, wanting skin on skin.

He wanted to see all of her, touch every part of her, memorize her shape, and cherish her body. He'd save the memory for a time when he'd never see her again. She'd made it pretty clear she had no time for men, and if this was all the time he had, he'd make it last. He'd show her what she'd miss. She seemed to have little experience with men. The experiences she'd had must not have been worth going back for. Could he change that? Could he make her crave him and never want to leave him? Did he want that? Permanence?

He'd think about that later, but he couldn't imagine her absence and certainly didn't want to think of her with someone else. Nick growled at that picture in his mind and got down to serious business. Keeping Jeni's back to him, he placed one arm under her head and held both her hands in his, under her face with his other hand. He'd lose his mind if she touched him.

* * * *

Jeni sucked in a stuttering breath as Nick's fingertips glided down her body, searing her with heat and making her body jerk and tremble with anticipation. Moving his fingers over all the right spots, he caressed her from the top of her shoulder to the curve of her breast then slid his warm, rough hand down her rib cage and angled his open palm over her hips. Then he splayed his hand over her waistline and onto her trembling tummy. She craved more, and she couldn't wait to feel what he had in store for her. If he stopped now, she'd kill him.

Jeni gasped when Nick moved his hand further down, touching her core and moving his fingers in a circular motion, igniting her to the boiling point. She burned so hot and was so wet for him she couldn't think straight. A wave of something between ecstasy and pain washed through her, causing her to spasm near a level of violence. Nick leaned forward and kissed her behind her ear. She shuddered and threw her head back. He caught the sound of her mindless reaction in his mouth. She'd been so close to the edge of orgasm and so aroused, he'd slung her over the brink with the slightest touch and movement of his talented, knowing touch.

She'd hoped for more, and she'd gotten it, but she'd read a few romance novels in her youth, before she'd decided to go off the deep end and stick her nose in a million textbooks. Nick fit the description of every perfect hero she'd ever read about. She wouldn't let him off the hook with one measly orgasm. Okay, so it wasn't measly. It was amazing, but still. There had to be more to this sex thing, and she wanted it. She wanted him. All of him.

But she wouldn't remain passive. Now what had those books said the *femme fatale* should do?

"Nick, I had no idea. *Madonna*." Jeni breathed the words into Nick's mouth with a sigh that nearly caused him to come, just with the simple caress of her voice. Then the words registered, and his body stilled.

"What are you saying? You've never had an orgasm that good before?" The very idea astonished him. The men she'd been with had been so selfish to have used her for their own purposes and never given her pleasure. Were they crazy? Pleasuring her was half the fun in his book.

"I've never anything before, but I've read about it, and now I know what I've been missing. I want more."

"What?" Nick raised up on his elbow and looked into her eyes. The truth registered a shock to his system. "You're a virgin?"

Uh, oh. Jeni read about this, too. Some guys thought that was sacred. Was he one of them? She lowered her eyes from his shocked stare. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let this go so far. I should've told you. You don't have to be with me. I know I'd disappoint you. I won't be any good, but I thought I had to start somewhere, and I wanted you, and I thought maybe you wanted me, too, and..." She started to turn from him as her faced flushed crimson. Nick held her down by her hip and spoke in her ear in a calm whisper. "Jeni, look at me."

She turned to him, and he held her face with his hand, running his thumb over her kissable lips and his fingers over her fluttering eyes lids. "I want you even more than before. I'm honored, that's all, and surprised someone as beautiful as you has never had a lover. Every man you've ever met must've been gay, or an idiot."

Nick moved her hand to his full erection. "This is what you do to me. I've been like this for days, so hard it hurts, but I don't want to hurt you, in any way, physically or emotionally; so if you want to stop at any time, let me know. If I hurt you, tell me. I'll try to take it slow and be gentle. I want you to know what you've been missing. I want you to be happy and satisfied."

Moisture pooled in her eyes, and Nick kissed her lids. She reached for him, wrapping her hands behind his neck. Gentle at first, the kiss plummeted to passionate in the blink of an eye. Nick took Jeni's breast in his hand and rolled his thumb over the protruding nipple. Jeni gasped. Nick released her lips and took her breast in his mouth, first using his tongue then his teeth. He nibbled then moved to the other breast for the same luxury, nipping at the extended protrusion begging for him to taste it.

Jeni wanted Nick inside her. She could feel the pressure mounting between her legs. The touching and kissing wouldn't be enough. Reaching up, she put her hands in his hair and lifted his head. She needed release. "Nick, please, now."

"Not yet. I want you to be ready. I want you to feel no more pain than necessary." Nick was so sweet.

Jeni didn't want sweet. She wanted heat and fire and hot and fast. If Nick took this any slower, she'd have to find a way to speed things up.

Nick's front faced Jeni's back, so she tried a bold move. Reaching behind her, she touched the hardness she could feel throbbing against her spine. Holding his steel-velvet length in her hand, she rolled her thumb over the moist tip of his penis, wet with his own fluids. He gasped, shuddered, and stopped the movement of her hand by grabbing her wrist, rough and forceful but not painful. "No. Stop. If you do that, I'm going to explode right here, right now. We won't make it any further."

Nick's voice was so hoarse she could scarcely make out the words. She pumped her hand down his length one more time. He groaned, rolled her onto her back, and rose above her, anchoring his weight on one elbow. His eyes met hers, blazing a hole through her, clear to her throbbing heart. Entering her with the tip of his erection, he gritted his teeth, and the muscles in his jaw jumped. Stopping his movement, he shook with restraint, the muscles in his arms, legs and jaws spasming.

Jeni moved under Nick in a circular motion out of instinct and desperate need. He closed his eyes and grabbed her waist with one hand. She froze as he spoke through clenched teeth. "We're not ready for you to do that yet. Please, wait, stop moving."

What did she do wrong? Or had she done something right? From the intense expression on his face, the sound of his deep voice, and the radical way he breathed in a rasp, she sensed his trembling and his hardness proved he wanted her but wasn't ready to give in.

Nick withdrew from her with mind-boggling deliberation, then reentered her with amazing precision and control, further this time, and again, deeper still. She moved beneath him, and that was apparently the last straw. He seemed to snap, plunging deeper, harder and faster.

She gasped, and her eyes flew open. Nick stilled—except for the tremors wracking his body. "Are you okay, baby?"

"I will be if you don't stop. Now, Nick, please," she whimpered.

He withdrew the full length of his manhood and thrust deep inside her, again and again. Another wave built, and the ecstasy flowed through her, stronger than the first time, taking over all her senses. She thought she might burst, and then she didn't think at all, only felt.

Digging her fingers into Nick's back for stability, she wrapped her legs around his waist, trying to become a part of him. She moved against him, matching his rhythmic movements. She couldn't get enough of him. Placing a hand on each side of his backside, she pulled him deeper into her body and heart, struggling for completion.

* * * *

Nick groaned, loving Jeni's wanton response. He took her mouth with his and continued to delve into her fiery core. The most intense orgasm he'd ever had consumed him, stealing his breath. His whole body was wracked by a wave of pure pleasure, bordering on pain, the strongest he'd ever known. He rode the wave of bliss to the end as Jeni's inner muscles tightened around him.

Sated, he lay holding her, afraid to move and lose the intimacy of the moment.

After a while, Nick gained his composure and rolled his weight to the side. Turning towards Jeni, he lay down on his arm, tucked his hand under his head, and looked at her. He adored her, but could he tell her?

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, Jeni snuggled up to him, facing him. She curled into a fetal position, placed her hands under head, tucked her head under his chin, and fell asleep.

She looked like an angel. He pulled the covers up to her waist, leaving her lovely breasts exposed. Draping his hand over her trim waist, he hardened again, but no way would he wake her and ravage her again. She'd be sore from his abuse of her body as it was. He should've been gentler, but he hadn't been able to hold back. Would he be able to hold back from her ever again? Would she want him to? Would he want to?

Physically drained but emotionally content, Nick drifted into slumber and slept more soundly than he had in a long, long time.

At least a year...

Consequences by Rebecca Savage

[Back to Table of Contents]

Fourteen

Jeni woke to the smell of Nick's maleness and their night of lovemaking. His warmth enveloped her, and the images of the night before rushed back to her, filling her senses and setting her nerve endings ablaze. She blushed, afraid to move. What did one do the morning after what they'd experienced and shared?

She had the distinct feeling the slight soreness between her jelly-filled legs wouldn't be the only hurt soon to hit her. Her heart was on the verge of being broken into glass shards. She wasn't sure if she was falling in love with Nick, but the chances of him falling in love with her were slim to none. Would she even want him to fall for her? She had her dreams to follow, her PhD to earn. Nick had his life. How could either of them work things out? How could two people like them mesh their lives and make a go of some semblance of a relationship? Why would they even want to?

She couldn't resist. She had to touch him. Placing her hand on his massive chest to feel his warmth and connect before what she'd experienced with this remarkable man slipped away and was gone forever, she smiled.

"Don't start something you don't plan to finish," Nick said in the most seductive drawl Jeni had ever heard anyone utter.

"Who says I won't finish it? You know how devoted I am to something once I get started." Jeni sighed, tossed her hair over her shoulder with a flick of her wrist and a fancy flourish, and fluttered her lashes. "Yeah, well, you don't know what you're saying. After last night, your body needs a break, but you won't get it if I attack you right now, and if you don't stop looking at me like that, right this minute, I'm going to ravish your beautiful body, again." He gave her a sly grin. "So, let's take a shower."

"Both of us?"

"Both of us, unless you're scared." He wiggled his eyebrows up and down and plastered on a wicked, rakish grin.

She was a little scared, but she wouldn't admit it, since the physical worried her less than the emotional pain she might endure when this ended.

Nick rolled out of bed and took her by the hand. He pulled her into the bathroom, stark naked and acting as if he ran around like that 24/7. Why shouldn't he? He was the sexiest man Jeni had ever seen. So much for being smart and graduating at the top of her class. How dumb of a move could one woman make in such a short span of time? Or had she made a mistake at all? Being with Nick sure hadn't felt wrong. It felt terribly right.

Nick turned on the water and checked the temperature. He turned back to her. They were both still naked and had slept that way. Nick put his hands to each side of her face, kissed her, and pulled her into the shower with him.

Jeni knew he wanted her again. The evidence jutted out in front of him like a majestic lightning rod as he held her close under the running water. He had another thing coming if he thought she was too sore to want him. * * * *

Nick eyed Jeni. What did she have in mind?

Jeni picked up the soap and lathered Nick's back, chest, and lower body. He put one hand against the shower wall and the other hand on her breast, for balance and stability. He lost the strength in his wobbly legs when she touched him. His knees went weak and limp, like they were about to give out, just from her simple touch. His pulse raced, and he was so ready for her it hurt.

Nick growled and took the soap from her. She teased him. She couldn't be ready again so soon.

He turned the same torture on her, and she rocked toward him, opening her legs and allowing him to wash away the night's lovemaking. She put her arms around his neck, pulled him to her, and wrapped one leg around his waist. He couldn't take it anymore. He lifted her against the shower wall and lowered her onto his erection, painstakingly slow, not wanting to hurt her. She was wet and more than ready. He moaned. He'd died and gone to heaven, so he might as well take advantage of her angelic generosity.

She responded by moving her hips in time with his rhythmic thrusts, meeting him with her own desire and enthusiasm, and gasps that made him lose the last shred of control he barely held onto.

He plunged slowly, deliberately, and completely into her. She arched into him and called out his name as she reached satisfaction, for him, just for him. He covered her mouth with his and kissed her, hard, tasting her, until he could no longer hold back, and his climax overtook him with a mind boggling rush of ecstasy.

As he came down off his high, and Jeni relaxed against him, he kissed her and let the water rinse them. Reluctant to leave her, he finally eased away. "Join me in the kitchen for breakfast when you're finished. If I stay until you finish bathing, you might never actually get clean. I'll keep getting you dirty all over again."

She giggled, and he chuckled, slapped her on the butt, and headed for the bedroom. He dressed for comfort, knowing what today would bring. It was Monday, time for Nick to get some answers at *Carpathia* from the manager of the club and maybe the owners, too.

Jeni obviously hadn't wasted time in the shower. Wrapped in a beach towel, she entered the kitchen as he pulled out bacon and eggs. "Why don't we stop somewhere for breakfast at a fast food joint? I don't know about you, but I'm anxious to get going."

Nick kissed her on the forehead. "Me, too. Great minds think alike." He took in her state of undress. "Put some damn clothes on, or we'll never get out of here."

Jeni laughed. "You have a seriously one-track mind."

"Damn right." He shoved her in the direction of the bedroom.

Nick's cell phone rang as Jeni trotted out of the kitchen. "Yeah, Captain. What do you have?"

"Barb Saranto's house is going up in flames as we speak. She's okay. Nobody's hurt, but the house is a total loss. You better get over here. John's already on scene, checking it out. Talk to Martinelli. She got there first."

Nick had that odd feeling again. "Why was Martinelli there this time?"

"She's your partner. She lives in the same neighborhood. By the way, same calling card. Jeni's name is all over the walk out back of the house."

"Damn." Nick paced the length of the small kitchen then halted. "Okay. We'll be there ASAP." Nick hung up as Jeni skipped back into the kitchen and came to a sudden stop. His expression must've been as sour as he thought it was. He laid a hand on the side of her face. "Well, babe, change of plans. He torched another victim's house. We'd better check it out. Probably won't tell us any more than the last time, but the circumstances are the same, except no one was hurt or killed this time."

"So we're going?" Jeni stared at him wide-eyed and covered the hand caressing her cheek.

Nick took her other hand in his. "Yeah."

* * * *

Jeni's gut clenched as Nick pulled his car onto the street where smoke billowed above the treetops. The scene was a shambles of wreckage, unimaginable smoke and fire damage, and wet ash all over the street and yard from the firemen's hoses. The sickening ruination made the other houses, brick and beautiful, look even nicer, yet vulnerable, and the neighbors staring in solemn silence looked vulnerable, too. "What a mess." Nick reached for her hand. "I know. I keep picturing your house going up in flames, and it makes me want to kill the son of a bitch."

Jeni sucked in a breath. "I hadn't even thought of that."

Nick winced. "Sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. I'm gonna do everything in my power to keep that from happening, starting with getting someone to monitor activity around your place until this insanity is over."

Jeni shuddered. "I feel sick to my stomach. This is such devastation, such loss. What horror the other women must be feeling."

Nick led Jeni to the back of the pile of debris between two massive two-story brick homes in the middle of the block. She stopped dead in her tracks. Her name extended down the length of the sidewalk in huge, black, charcoal script. She cringed at the sight, the blaring reality.

Nick shielded her, blocking her view. "I'm sorry. Damn. I forgot. You should stay by the car."

"Why?" Jeni cried and put her head on Nick's shoulder. "Why is my name written there? Why is he doing this to me, to anyone?"

He wrapped his arm around her. "I don't know, but it looks like he's working his way backwards through the list of victims. First Sarah, number six, now this woman, Barb, number five. You were the last one abducted, number seven. Could be he's leaving you alone because I'm at your house, but there might be another reason. I don't know, but I'm sure the perp knows you all well enough to know if you're protected or not. Since I'm sheltering you, he has to attack someone else first. That doesn't explain why your name is on the sidewalk, though."

Martinelli waltzed up and nodded a reluctant greeting at Jeni. Jeni nodded back, wordless. Vick turned and placed her body between Jeni and Nick. "Well, nobody was killed this time. But the house is a goner."

Same damn perfume and tons of it. The scent did nothing for Vick, but on Lori it'd been nice. She'd wrinkled her nose up at first when she got a whiff of the aroma coming from Lori, but she'd gotten over the annoyance fast, as soon as she'd learned Lori's personality. It sure couldn't compare to Vick's. She was a definite oddity, and the pint of perfume only added to the aura and made Jeni want to run the other way.

Nick touched Jeni's elbow. "I'm gonna take a look around. Wait here."

Nick left Jeni at the mercy of the woman Jeni thought of as an evil barracuda. Martinelli stared openly and appreciatively at Nick's backside as he strolled away. A pang of jealousy struck Jeni right in her midsection. Martinelli was Nick's partner for work, but she couldn't be Nick's type in any other arena. Of course, neither was Jeni, truth be told. In a way, she regretted their intimacy, an obvious mistake, but in another way, no. Their time together would end soon, but she could take the memory with her.

She looked away from the smirking Martinelli. If she'd never met Nick, she wouldn't have to give him up and go back to her loneliness.

"If you're sleeping with him, it won't last." Martinelli tossed the words at Jeni with the haughtiness of the Queen of England. "It never does."

Vick walked away, leaving Jeni standing there with her jaw locked and her eyes narrowed. Oddly enough, she wasn't jealous anymore, but she had a weird thought on her mind. Maybe Sal smelled like Lori and Vick's perfume the night she was stuck in that hole? Was that why she found it so revolting? A residual memory affecting her and irritating her?

Fifteen minutes passed, and just as Jeni thought she might go after Nick, he returned from checking out the burned remains of the victim's home. He took Jeni by the arm and led her to his car. "I'm leaving the others to complete their assigned tasks. Let's go to the club."

He pulled up close to the entrance. Jeni followed him inside, glancing at Nick. "I hope someone's here this early." She peaked at her watch. "Ten. Isn't the manager supposed to be back by now?"

Nick nodded. "The workers are probably still sleeping it off from last night's partying, but the custodian said the manager would be in to catch up on weekend paperwork."

The manager turned out to be a stout man that stood just over six feet and looked like a bouncer, and probably was in his younger days. He had wide shoulders, beefy biceps, and was built like a line-backer, with thick, sausage-like fingers. He shook Nick's hand and said in a very deep, steroid-altered voice, "I'm Jim. How can I help you?"

"I'm Detective Nick Tarentino, and I have a few questions to ask you. I need some straight answers." Jim nodded. "Rich said you'd been by. What can I tell you?"

"Rich?"

Jim angled his head toward the hallway. "Custodian."

"I need to know exactly when the owner will return." "Three weeks from today. Anything else?" Jim crossed his arms across his massive, weightlifter's chest and shifted his feet apart in a distinct warning that said he wouldn't stand for anyone badmouthing his boss.

Nick took out a pen and paper. "The owner's phone number?"

Jim hesitated. "Can't this wait until she returns? She's on vacation."

Nick shook his head. "No. It can't wait."

Jim narrowed his eyes. "Mind telling me why not?"

Nick stood his ground. "Not at all. I'll have questions for you, too."

Jim pursed his lips. "I won't answer them without the go ahead from my boss."

Nick shrugged. "You'll answer them, either now, or when I book you for obstruction of justice." Nick stepped closer. The big man looked like a brick wall next to Nick, but Nick didn't flinch or back down. "I don't need details hitting the streets or the press. I have a criminal to catch before he does any more damage. Now you can cooperate, or I can take you downtown and see if you loosen your tongue."

Jim stretched to his full height, just a bit taller than Nick. "I don't think you can make that happen. You've got no reason to take me anywhere." "If you're this uncooperative, I can come up with probable cause. Maybe you're hiding something. Maybe you're the perp," Nick growled.

Jim squinted at Nick. "I haven't done a damn thing."

"You'd better start doing something, like giving me the information I need." He opened his notebook again. "The number. Now."

Jim creased his brow but gave Nick the number. "Jeni won't like being called in the middle of the Caribbean."

Nick stilled, as did Jeni. Nick glanced at her, and she glanced back. Nick asked Jim, "How do you know Jeni?"

Jim angled his head in confusion. "The owner. Didn't Rich tell you?"

"Shit. No. He didn't tell me her name. I didn't ask. I figured I get that when I talked to her." Nick wheeled around and stalked away from Jim.

Jim shouted. "Hey, what's this all about, anyway?" "Just stick around. I'll be back."

Nick dragged Jeni behind him. "Let's get out of here." Then he halted and asked Jim one last question. "Have you seen anyone around here that looked like they might be stalking someone, or doing anything else out of the ordinary?"

Jim chuckled. "That about describes every single customer we have in here, buddy. Pick one."

Nick's jaw clenched. He mumbled under his breath, "Prick."

Jeni cringed as Nick took her arm and pulled her along behind him. "Where are we going?"

Nick snarled, "I've got to get a hold of this Jeni chick. She's the key. Not you. It's her name scrawled all over the damn sidewalk. The kidnapper probably had no idea you had the same name. Damn it. You're all just collateral damage. The freak is after her, Jeni, the owner. Not you, Jeni, the victim. This is his way of hurting *that* Jeni, but he doesn't give a damn who he hurts in the process."

"But why?"

Nick shoved the door open, and light blasted Jeni's eye. He let her go through first then slammed the door closed. "Who knows? Money. He either plans to make some or cause the owner to lose some. He may plan to bribe the owner. Or it could be about the reputation of the club if he holds a grudge. Give the place a bad rep and watch the profits plummet."

"You think that's all this is about? Money?"

"What else? Oldest motive in the book. Greed and revenge."

"And jealousy."

Nick came up short, still holding Jeni's hand as he reached his car. "Jealousy?"

"Yeah. You know, the green eyed monster. Never heard of it?" She smiled, trying to ease his tension. For some reason, her own tension had fled. She wanted to find the guilty party and end this, but she didn't feel a need for haste.

Nick used his free hand to touch her face with his knuckles. "Aren't you scared?"

She leaned into him. "Nope. You've got that covered. I trust you."

Nick dropped his hand from her face and pulled his other hand from hers. "Your safety is my top priority, but I'm not superhuman. He could get to you." Jeni grasped his shirt collar. "I have no reason to worry about my life as long as you're on the job. It'd have to be a pretty devoted, ruthless, psychopath after me if he expects to get past you."

Nick's jaw twitched. "The sick bastard could be that bad and dangerous. He did kidnap seven women."

Jeni stretched to her tiptoes, ignoring the fact Nick stiffened and kept his hand locked to his sides. "Not right under a cop's nose."

Jeni licked her lips, and Nick's eyes dropped. His breathing picked up pace, and Jeni's heart beat a mile a minute. She stretched a bit more, and kissed him on the lips, a quick smack.

Nick blinked and studied her with narrowed eyes. Turning on his heels, he strode to her side of the car, yanked the door open, and practically shoved Jeni into the passenger seat. He swung around to his side, dialing the number even as he slammed his body into the driver's seat. He slammed the door closed, the phone stuck to his ear, and turned the key. Within seconds he clicked the phone shut. "No answer. Went straight to voicemail. If the twit doesn't answer soon, I'm gonna track her down through the Red Cross or something. The manager can't protect her if I get an order from a judge."

Jeni reached out to him. He winced at her light touch. "Let's calm down, okay? We have time. We have other things we can do, people to talk to. Maybe we can go at this another way." Nick looked at her, inhaled deep and long, and twisted his hand into hers. "I'm sorry. This case is getting to me. I want it to be over."

Jeni held his gaze. "Why is it getting to you so badly? What is it about *Carpathia* that affects you so strongly?"

He pulled his hand from hers. He wouldn't tell her. She knew it. He didn't trust her. She turned to look out the window. He pulled out of the parking lot and headed for her house. So much for progress and intimacy. Even mindboggling sex hadn't opened Nick up and convinced him to share anything real with her. Not that she minded. It's what she'd wanted, before. Nothing more. Nothing less.

But damn, it hurt to know it's what he wanted, too. [Back to Table of Contents]

Fifteen

A mighty storm brewed in Nick's cloudy eyes. He sat across from Jeni at her kitchen table, dialing his cell every five minutes, trying to reach the owners of *Carpathia*. He wanted this guy bad, and Jeni suspected it wasn't just because of her case. She might not be a cop, but she had instincts. This case was personal for him, and his rage simmered beneath his borderline volatile surface.

Anger poured from him. He more than brooded. He boiled. He'd closed her out, locked his heart up tight, and thrown away the key. She smiled inwardly. She could claim his body, if she wanted, even if he held his heart at bay. She wanted that much of him, at least. He'd turned her into a wanton beast with one dose of amazing sex. He'd broken her virginal constraints, and she wanted more out of life. Or at least out of *him*.

Jeni rose from her chair and started out of the room toward her front door. Nick's sharp-edged, clipped voice stopped her like a brick wall. "Where are you going?"

She swung around, irritated at his brusque demeanor. "Be nice, Nick. You don't have the right to be an ass. I've been nothing but good to you and helpful. I haven't done a damn thing to deserve your brashness, so drop the tone." She stuck her hands on her hips. "And I don't need your permission to leave the room."

Nick narrowed his eyes. "Not the room, no. The house, yes."

"I'd like to get my newspaper from the front lawn, if that's okay with you, Your Highness. Since you're not speaking to me, conversation is out of the question. I'm bored out of my mind, and I want some reading material. I'm not into TV, and I don't think I can focus on a novel with you hovering over me like an overprotective nanny."

Nick stared at her a second longer, strode past her, and unlocked the deadbolt on her front door. He stepped out, whisked up the paper, and strolled back in. He stuck the paper in her hands and slumped back into his seat at her table, hitting the numbers even as he plopped down.

Jeni shook her head and sat across from him. She gasped at the headlines.

Nick's head jerked up. "What?"

Jeni pushed the paper across the table at him with shaky hands.

Nick sat up straight. "Shit. Some asshole leaked way too damn much to the press."

Jeni gulped. "Who allowed this? Who let them take all those pictures of Sarah's house? Don't the owners of the property need to give permission to the press to get this up close and personal?" Jeni shook her head. "Sarah wouldn't allow this. Would she?"

Nick gritted his teeth. "Doubt it." He read for a minute. Jeni sat, stunned speechless, gaping at the photos of the wreckage, and her name scrawled in ugly black lettering and covered in soot. "Dumbass." He glanced at Jeni. "Sorry. Franco's parents stepped in. They allowed the photos. They said they couldn't get in touch with Sarah." Nick peered Jeni. "She's probably refusing to have anything to do with the funeral arrangements. Sounds like she wants to wash her hands of the whole thing." Nick read further. "Damn it. They suspect the wife, Sarah, of foul play ... blah ... blah ... blah." Nick slammed the paper down on the table top. "Rubbish. We can't let this continue. I'll have to release some kind of statement to the press. Sarah's name doesn't need to be dragged through the dirt any more than it already has. Her life's been stomped on by her louse of a husband. Obviously Franco's parents raised him to be the way he was."

Jeni's heart flipped. Nick was the kind of moral man she could love. Every new turn of events and kind gesture drove her deeper into that abyss. She fidgeted, then stood, wringing her hands. So much for wanting a flippant affair. She slid down a slippery slope with no way to cling to anything and stop her descent into heartbreak, and Nick stood there pushing buttons on his cell, oblivious, as if she hadn't taken a nosedive into a crater she might never climb back out of.

"Yeah, Captain. Did you see the morning paper?" Nick's eyes widened. "An autopsy? What the hell for?" Nick's eyes narrowed. "He died before the fire?" Nick paced, then froze. "What do you mean Martinelli said he was alive when she talked to him? When did she talk to him?" Nick slapped his hand against the door jamb between the kitchen and living room. "Why didn't she tell me she'd been in his house before the fire? Why isn't that in the report?" Nick took a deep breath. "Okay. Fine. I'll talk to her." Nick closed his eyes and dropped into the chair. "Bitch." He turned Jeni. "I guess you caught the drift of that." "Franco was murdered before he was baked." Jeni sighed. "It doesn't take a police officer to figure that one out." Jeni stepped closer to him. "We're Sarah's alibi, right?"

Nick reached out and grasped Jeni's shoulders and pulled her to him. "Yeah. We know that, and Sarah knows that, but the press will print anything if they can't reach the other party for verification, and Sarah's not talking. Her sister must have her locked up tight." Nick pushed Jeni away and looked into her eyes. "Think she'd answer the phone for us?"

Jeni shrugged. "We can try."

Jeni dialed, and Sarah picked up on the first ring. Her voice sounded raw across the line. "Jeni?"

Jeni smiled. Sarah had recognized her from the caller id. "Yeah. How's it going, sweetie?"

Sarah sobbed, then got her voice under control. "I guess this call means you've seen the papers. Franco's parents are trying to crucify me. What should I do?"

"Nothing, Sarah. Don't do a damn thing. Nick's going to release a statement and let the public know we're your alibi. Don't worry. We'll take care of everything."

"I just want my life back, Jeni, you know? I want normalcy. I can't deal with this. I'll have to deal with the insurance company, but they probably won't even consider my claim."

Jeni tensed. "They will after Nick releases that press statement. Give them a call. Get things started. Get your life back on track, and forget about Franco and his abominable family. And don't move back here. Get things cleared up, and leave your past behind. It can only hurt you to stay here with so many depressing reminders of Franco's mistreatment of you."

Sarah sighed. "God, Jeni, I'm glad I met you, even under these horrid circumstances. You make so much sense. My sister's been saying the same thing, but we didn't know which way to go with these accusations being flung at me. Now I have a new direction to follow. Thanks so much, and thank Nick for me, too."

Jeni could hear the woman's relief. "Have a good life, Sarah. You deserve it. Call me if you need me or have any questions, and if you need a place to stay while you deal with your house and insurance, you know where I live."

Sarah sniffled into the receiver. "Thanks again. Bye." "Bye, Sarah."

Nick stood watching her, and she slid into a chair, her knees weak as wet paper. Thank goodness she didn't have to deal with this, so far. Would she be next, or at least somewhere down the line? Would her house get torched? Would she be murdered as Franco had been? She shivered, and the hair stood on the back of her neck. Her future prospects didn't look so good. They looked damn bleak, in fact.

Jeni looked up. Nick loomed over her. He'd moved to her side. His eyes darkened to black orbs. His gaze softened, but his dilated pupils took up the bulk of his eyeballs, covering what'd been the whites of his eye. What made him look like that?

Jeni shuddered. She couldn't help it. Had he seen her reaction as she gazed up at him? He didn't act like it. He

stood there, legs locked, hands fisted. Finally, he sat down next to her, his knees brushing hers. He went back to punching buttons. Jeni grabbed the phone from his hand and barely restrained herself from throwing it across the kitchen. He looked at her like she'd lost her mind, his mouth agape.

"Give it a damn break, Nick. Leave them be. They're not answering. They probably left the freakin' phone behind in their hotel room. Or maybe they're having hot and heavy sex." Jeni's eyes narrowed. "It's called vacation. They *do not* want to be disturbed."

Nick grabbed her wrist and wrenched the phone back out of her hand. He glared at her. "I wasn't calling the owners of *Carpathia*. I was calling a news reporter I know. I'll give him the exclusive and earn some brownie points. Maybe he won't drag my department through the mud during this mess, or the next one I have to dig myself out of."

Jeni sucked in a breath. "Sorry." She rubbed her wrist. It tingled where he'd touched her at her pressure point. His rough treatment should've pissed her off. Instead, it turned her on. How crazy was that? "Call him, and while you're at it, maybe you can tell him to keep my name out of the whole sha-bang."

"None of the victims' names have been released, except the one already deceased when we found her. We couldn't help that. Funeral arrangements had to be made by her family. So they leaked that the kidnapping took place, but they don't know who or how many were the victims. Captain Martuscello told me when we went to the office they're demanding information." Nick ran a hand through his nowtangled hair. "I hate this crap. The not knowing."

Jeni placed her hand on his thigh. The muscles jumped beneath her touch. His gaze swung to hers and darkened. "I know, Nick. You're stuck between a rock and a hard place. You care for the victims' families, but for the sake of the others, to protect them, and me, you can't give out clues of the investigation. I assume that's why you won't tell me about *Carpathia*."

Nick's jaw worked, his gaze dropping to where her hand rested on his worn jeans. "They'll be speculating about Barb's fire next, wondering if the burnings are linked." He pulled his brows together. "If my men talk, I'll have their heads."

Jeni let her lips curve into a smile. "I'll bet."

Nick zeroed in on her lips. "What are you doing?"

Jeni widened her eyes, and she let her hand slide up his leg. Nick's breathing stopped. "I'm not doing anything. You sound like a real go-getter to me, a real buckaroo. I've never hand my hands all over a cowboy before."

Nick sucked in a hissing breath as she moved her hand an inch higher. "Ever heard the saying, save a horse?"

Jeni stood and moved to his side. "Does that mean you want to ride a cowboy?" She straddled him, and he trembled beneath her. "It's a distinct possibility." She lowered until they were crotch to crotch. "Are you up for it?"

Nick's hands flew to her waist and gripped her tight. She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned down to meet his tasty lips. Nick tugged her closer with one firm hand behind her head and one pulling her bottom plumb against his hard manhood. Jeni's breath caught at the tantalizing contact of her wetness to his steel. Nick's mouth consumed hers, and her mind buzzed then skittered to a screeching halt. Her body jolted, and she rocked against him. Nick growled and reached down to massage her through her cotton capris, and she whimpered for more.

Jeni tossed her head back, breaking their kiss. Nick placed both hands under her bottom and lifted her. He let her feet touch the floor long enough for him to release his shaft and strip her pants off her shaking body. He reached behind her, grabbed her butt, and spread her legs around his waist. He sat back down. "Now. Where were we?"

Jeni laughed and shoved her hands into his silky hair, bringing his face back to hers, his mouth and tongue to meet her searching lips and teeth. God, he tasted good, and felt good. She'd never imagined a kiss could be like this, or making love could matter so much. Not in all her years of studious endeavors had she foreseen this limitless need building inside her. Biology had never made this clear. Why didn't they have a lab to study this behavior and test sexual theory?

Nick touched the underside of her breast with his thumbs, and all thought fled her boggled mind. He flicked her protruding nipples through her shirt, and she nearly went through the roof. He continued to assault her mouth and reached down to insert a finger in her wet heat. She nearly came unglued, but Nick refused to release her mouth. He simply caught her gasps in his with his thrilling, consuming lips and kept kissing her. He added another finger and delved deep inside her, then used his thumb to swirl the moisture from inside her core and swipe it around her sensitive nub. She came then, her body spasming and shattering around Nick's talented hand. He drove her to mindless mush, mad, intense orgasms, wave after raging wave of pleasure, slicing through her.

When she could think again, she realized Nick's body needed release as much as hers. His thickness pressed against her belly, and she touched the dripping tip of him with her fingernails, scraping the essence of his need from his sex. Nick's mouth left hers, and his head reared back, his eyes closed, his jaw set. He gritted his teeth and groaned, as if in pain. She knew better, and she delighted at the power she had over him.

Jeni lifted over Nick, held his shaft in one hand, and slid down his length, enveloping him. Nick shuddered with each additional inch inside her sheath. So did Jeni. Why would she ever need anything or anyone else to complete her?

The thought wafted out of her mind as Nick began to pump inside her, his hands on her waist, lifting her up, then pressing her back down. She used her feet on the floor to keep balance and aid in Nick's efforts and hers. Nick picked up the pace. She followed his lead. He thrust in and out, his hips gyrating, twisting, turning, and sending maddening shock waves echoing through her body. Another orgasm hit her with the force of a hurricane.

Nick's climax blasted into her body, washing warmth throughout hers. She clung to him, feeling more complete than she'd ever felt in her whole, organized, planned out life. Nothing would ever be the same, now that she'd met Nick, and had him. Maybe she couldn't keep him, but she'd damn sure have him while she could. She could function that way. She could keep up with a man and his way of thinking. She had to. She studied with mostly men, in her world of academia, and she'd work with mostly males when she got a position as a university professor. So she could think like one and take sex as it came, literally and figuratively.

She hoped.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Sixteen

Nick moaned into Jeni's ear as she draped herself around him. "What the hell was that all about?"

Jeni smiled into his neck and licked his salty, sweaty throat. His Adam's apple bobbed wildly under her tongue. "You didn't like it?"

Nick pushed her back from him and glared at her with his piercing eyes. "Witch. You're a witch."

Jeni waved her hand like a wand. "Hocus pocus. Come for me."

Nick flexed his hips, his penis still inside her, firm as the rock of Gibraltar. "You don't need magic for that."

Jeni enjoyed this side of Nick, his teasing, his sexual prowess. "Got any more of what you just gave me?"

Nick's brows rose. "Plenty."

He lifted her off him, his strong hands at her hips, digging in. Swinging her up in his arms, he proceeded to show her what he had left. Carrying her into the bedroom, he stripped the rest of her clothes from her body, tugged his own clothes away from his gorgeous torso, and grinned a cocky grin. "Get ready, cowgirl, this is gonna be a long night."

Jeni slapped a hand to his chest. "Wait. Aren't you forgetting something?"

Nick stilled. "What?"

Jeni grinned. "Call that reporter friend of yours. Get it over with. I want our night to be free and clear. No interruptions."

Nick looked down at his erection. Jeni followed his gaze. "Fine. I'll make the call." He pinned Jeni to the bed with a dark, smoldering gaze. "Don't move. Don't even think about it." Nick headed out the door. "I can't talk with you standing there naked. Too damn distracting. I'll be right back."

Jeni waited. Nick was true to his word. He didn't take more than five minutes with his reporter friend. Jeni heard him returning. She prepared herself for the force that was Nick. She smiled at the sight of his erection. Yep, it'd be a long night all right.

* * * *

Nick lay awake just before dawn. He couldn't believe his bout of good luck. He'd spent the better part of the night making love to Jeni, and she was insatiable. It blew his mind, especially since he was well aware of her lack of experience. She was a damn fast learner, incredibly responsive, and exuberant beyond all comprehension. He couldn't imagine giving her up and refused to consider it. He wasn't sure she felt the same way, and he hadn't told her about Isabella yet. Why should he? Would Isabella matter to Jeni and their relationship, such as it was?

No, but Jeni and Isabella were linked, and he'd have to say his true goodbyes to Isabella and his past if he meant to go forward with Jeni. He wanted Jeni to be his future if she'd have him, if he could convince her this wasn't just about sex, amazing as it was. She gave him the impression she looked at this as all fun and games. Her attitude had changed drastically somewhere along the line. He had to make her see he meant business *and* pleasure.

Nick jolted out of his reverie at the shrill of his cell on the night stand.

Jeni moaned. "Tell me this isn't happening. Can't we get a little peace and sleep in for once?"

Jeni snuggled against him, and he gripped her body tighter to his side. He answered the phone, growling, "This better be important."

He didn't recognize the number, or the voice, disguised as it was with some sort of device. "Get your ass to the manhole you dug those bitches out of if you want victim number four to survive. And come alone, without the whore you're screwing. If you bring a tag-along, the bitch I'm holding hostage dies a painful death in a fiery inferno."

"What..." The dial tone sounded flat and annoying in Nick's ear. He sat up straight in bed and glared at the phone in his hand. "What the hell?"

Jeni sat next to him, holding the sheet to cover herself. He winced. He didn't want her holding back, but that was the least of his worries right now. Jeni's tone and expression registered concern. "What is it?"

"He's got someone in the manhole." Nick tossed the covers aside and ran for the living room and his manila file folders. He flipped through them in a flurry of pages. "It's Layla Manning. The perp has her and wants me to come to them."

Jeni reached for him, her face drawn, taut and pale. "You can't go. You might be in danger."

Nick shook free of her. "I'm a cop, Jeni. This is my job. I don't avoid danger at the risk of losing someone else's life."

"But you'll call for backup, right?"

Nick shook his head. "He'll know if I bring someone. He says to come alone."

Jeni ran for her bedroom, slinging the words over her shoulder. "I'm going with you."

Nick's heart stopped beating in his chest cavity. "No, you're not." He followed her. She shoved her leg into a pair of jeans. "Jeni, I said no. I'm calling for someone to watch your house. This could be a plot to get you alone."

Jeni stuck her feet in tennis shoes. He wasn't getting through her thick skull. She wiggled into her jeans and glanced at him. "It could also be a plot to get rid of you, too. You know too much."

Nick shook his head. A headache began at his temple and spanned outward, throbbing and pounding in his brain. He punched the button to dial for police protection for Jeni. "Everything I know is on paper and in my computer files. It wouldn't matter if he killed me. This is about you. He wants to get you alone, without me taking care of you."

"Why? If you leave someone here, stationed outside, both at the front and back doors, I'm still guarded."

Nick grew confused. She made sense. "You're right. Why me? Why drag me away?" His brow furrowed deeper. "Surely, this has nothing to do with me."

Jeni pulled a shirt over her head and either forgot her bra or ignored the fact she wore none. She glared at him, fire sparking in her beautiful eyes. "Tell me about *Carpathia* on the way." She headed for the door. "You're connected to that place, too. I know it, and you know it."

Nick cringed. "That has nothing to do with your kidnapping, and it's none of your business."

Jeni poked him in the chest. "It sure as hell is. If someone wants you dead, that's my business."

Nick blinked. She was glorious in full fury mode. He liked that she thought she was his business, but he didn't want her in the middle of this any more than she already was. "You're not going, and that's final."

Jeni plopped her hands on her hips. "I'll slump down in the car seat. I won't let the perp know I'm there." She planted her feet apart and gritted her teeth. "But I am going."

Nick sighed. "Damn stubborn woman."

Jeni gave a brisk nod. "Got that right, bucko."

Nick opened the car door and let her in. He closed the door and ran to his side. He drove in silence. Within minutes, they neared the street he never wanted to see again but had no choice to go to. "Get down. I don't want you to stick your head back up until I get back in this car or you see about fifty emergency vehicles pull onto this street. Got it?"

Jeni nodded and slinked down below the line of vision of any onlooker. Nick pulled onto the street and shuddered. No streetlights. What the hell had happened to the overhead lights? The perp wasn't taking any chances. He'd doused the lights, probably shot them out, or flipped a switch somewhere in some breaker box. How did this guy know so much? Was he a city worker, an electrician, someone who kept tabs on the ongoings of the case? Did he have an informant on the inside? How had the son of a bitch gotten his private cell phone number?

Nick put his hand on the door to get out, and Jeni stopped him, her hand on his. Her voice shook when she whispered, "Be careful, Nick."

He squeezed her fingers and gave a curt nod. He had to do this. A woman's life balanced on what he did right now. He had let Isabella down. He wouldn't let anyone else die on this street, no matter the cost to him personally.

Nick got out, his gun in front of him, his flashlight searching the shadows, his heart thumping like a drum gone wild. He'd parked practically on top of the manhole cover. He scooted the metal grate with his foot. It moved easily. He took one last look around and kicked the car door shut behind him. He dropped to the ground and lay on his belly. Déjà vu slammed him in the face. He stuck his head in the very same hole where he'd found Jeni, but there was nothing. No woman tied to the pole. No sobbing women further away. No sound or sight. No perp. Nothing. Just blackness.

He'd have to go down there. He had no choice. His fate awaited him. Nick had a bad feeling about this. Would he survive? He desperately wanted to. He wanted to spend time with Jeni, lots of time, years maybe...

He couldn't focus on that right now. He had a job to do, a sadistic freak to face. Nick hurried down the ladder, flashed his light around, and saw the woman, a few feet away, tied to another pole. Keeping his attention focused on his surroundings, he eyed her out of his peripheral vision. She was tied and gagged, but the single rope would cut away in one, sharp whack.

Nick reached her and knelt next to her, lowering his gun to the floor, within easy reach. Flipping the knife from his boot, he opened it with a flick of his wrist, reached behind her, and cut her loose in one swift swoop.

Nick started to reach for her gag, but her panic-stricken eyes darted from side to side. She moved them and her head at an odd angle. What was she trying to tell him? He ripped the gag from her mouth. "What is it, Layla?"

"Explosives. He's gonna blow us both up." Layla's breath heaved. She was scared out of her mind. Nick couldn't blame her.

Nick whipped his head around. Sure enough, there they were. Enough explosives to set the block on fire. A mechanism stuck out of the top of the pile of sticks of dynamite. "Does he have a device to set them off?"

"Yes. Oh, God, we're gonna die." Layla sobbed, but Nick didn't have time to deal with tears. He had to get her under control. If she panicked, he wouldn't have time or strength to drag a kicking, crying woman out of there. He needed her help. He shook her until he heard her teeth rattle. "Listen. We'll make it. Just get off your ass, and follow me." He tugged her up and grasped her hand. "Run."

Nick headed for the closest manhole, then thought better of it. Better get some distance between them and the explosives. He continued to run and pull the wailing woman behind him. God, why couldn't she be like Jeni and keep her head in a situation like this? Nick halted. *Oh, God, Jeni*. She sat in his car, right atop the inferno the perp had promised. She'd be blasted to Kingdom Come. He had to get out of this hole and get to her. He had to warn her.

Turning a corner, he started for a ladder...

The blast ripped through the underground tunnel and scorched him. He dove for cover, shielding Layla with his own singed body.

Oh, God, Jeni. Please, don't be dead.

His heart pounded, and his lungs burned. Very little oxygen remained in the hole, but there were a hell of a lot of other gases, unpleasant, smelly ones. The smoke billowed and blocked all vision. He tucked his arm over his nose. "Cover your nose and mouth, and climb like crazy up that ladder. I'll be right behind you."

Layla hacked and coughed but did as he said. She ascended the ladder, and Nick stayed right on her tail, rushing her. He needed to get to Jeni. This couldn't be happening again. He couldn't lose another woman on this street. Not one he cared about like he did Jeni. Like he had Isabella.

Layla pushed the manhole cover to the side, and Nick put his hand on her butt and shoved her over the edge. She gasped at the contact, but he didn't care what she thought of his touch. He needed out of that damn hole. He couldn't see anything. His eyes burned, and smoke filtered through as he rose out of the hole. Hell, it swirled up from every hole on the street, and flames licked through some of them. Nick rolled to his feet and surged forward. Then he stood stock still. Where was Jeni? Where was his car? Oh, God, did the sick son of a bitch have Jeni?

Tires screeched behind him, and he turned his gun toward the vehicle approaching. It was Jeni, headlights off, coming at a fast clip. *Smart. She's damn smart*. She knew he wouldn't be able to see her with the headlights on, the light reflecting of the smoke like it would off fog or blinding snow. She rolled the window down and bellowed, "Get in."

Nick didn't need any more invitation. He grabbed Layla, yanked his back door open, shoved Layla in, and climbed in the back with her. "Go. Drive. Damn fast."

"I can do that."

The tires squealed as Jeni did a u-turn right in the middle of that narrow, deadly street. Nick gripped Jeni's shoulder. He needed the contact, the assurance she was real and not figment of his imagination. "How did you know to move the car?"

Jeni shrugged and put her hand on his. "I didn't. I just felt ... exposed out there. I moved to the corner and watched, thinking if you came out of that hole in danger or if someone tried to follow you in, I'd run the son of a gun over." Jeni shuddered and angled onto the interstate. "Then the damn street bounced, literally. The whole street jumped, and I thought the world would buckle right in two. I realized what'd happened when the fire and smoke escaped the holes. I started the car and hoped you'd survived. I saw you rise out of the ground, and I peeled out." Nick squeezed her shoulder. "You're a bright one, I'll give you that. Maybe you should be my partner. Who the hell needs Vick when I can have you?'

"Humph. Can't argue that point."

Nick called his captain. "Better get a crew down here to the same hole I pulled Jeni out of. All hell's broke loose. The sick bastard blew the underground tunnel system all to heck and back."

Martuscello spat a line of profanity into the phone then heaved a sigh. "Are you all right? Where are you? Why were you there?"

Nick gave him the run down. Martuscello acknowledged the info and told Nick, "I'll send out investigators. This means more paperwork, you know. Not to mention dealing with the mayor and the press."

"I know, and it's starting to piss me off."

Martuscello grunted. "Called Vick yet?"

"No, gonna ring her up now. She needs to be here.

Might as well share the fun of all those mounds of paper pushing."

Martuscello hung up. Nick's tension eased. He touched the most important part of this, Jeni. He hadn't loosened his grip on her shoulder. He had no plans on doing so anytime soon.

Nick turned to Layla. "You remember anything you can tell us about the perp? Can you identify him? What he looks like? Sound like?"

Layla wrapped her arms around herself and curled her bare feet underneath her on the seat and shrank away from him. "It was dark when he came into my bedroom, so I didn't see much. I heard a noise, woke up, and turned my head. He's shorter than most men and wiry. He wore a ski mask and a bulky set of overalls. He never said a word. Just shoved a bag over my head." She shuddered. "I thought I'd die from suffocation. I couldn't breath. I struggled, and for a minute, I thought I might get away. Then he tripped me and knocked me down on the floor. He tied my hands behind my back and removed the sack from my face and gagged me."

Layla's head jerked back and forth and rocked her body left and right. "No." She gulped. "I saw the explosives. I think he wanted me to see and know it was coming. I think he wanted me to be afraid, as if I wasn't already scared out of my mind."

Nick touched her arm. "It's all right now, but why wasn't someone with you? Didn't you have police protection?"

"No. My dad refused it. He said his security was good enough. We live in a pretty big place in a typically safe neighborhood, upscale. We have alarms and all that, but the guy got in, anyway."

Nick cringed. "That means he's knowledgeable about that sort of thing, and he's got an inside scoop, somehow. He knew your dad's address."

Layla shook her head. "He could've gotten that from my ID in my purse. I live with my parents. I'm in college."

"Still might have an inside angle. We'll see, and I'm gonna put police protection on the rest of the homes, whether they want it or not, at this point."

And he'd not be leaving Jeni's side, not for all the tea in China.

Consequences by Rebecca Savage

[Back to Table of Contents]

Seventeen

Nick led Jeni and Layla into the building and into his office. He took their statements. Jeni's eyewitness account would be as important as the victim's. He shoved the completed forms into a file folder. "I've got to go back down there, to the scene."

She jumped up. "Fine. Let's go."

Nick stepped in front of her. "Not this time. Stay here. There's a staff room to the left around the corner. There's a fairly decent sized and comfortable sofa and lots of strong black coffee if you want some. I can have food brought in, if you'd like."

Jeni propped her hands on her hips in that defiant stance of hers. "What I'd like is for you to stop coddling me and let me in on this." She looked at him, a frown of accusation creasing her lovely features. "And you still haven't told me about your connection to *Carpathia.*"

"I will. Later." He promised, and meant it. It was time to give up the ghosts of his past. He needed to heal. So did Jeni. That healing could only begin with telling Isabella goodbye and Jeni's parents farewell, properly. "Right now, I need you here, safe and sound. As it is, I'm gonna get enough shit from my boss when he finds out I took you, a civilian, into a risky situation."

Jeni stared at him with a militant expression for a minute, then her features softened. She reached up to caress his cheek. "Okay, but please be careful. Sometimes criminals return to the scene of the crime, or so I've heard. The bastard might shoot you from a distance. This guy is no one to mess with from what I've seen, and he might even have sniper capabilities."

Nick laid his hand on hers as she touched his face. He moved closer, not caring about what his co-workers thought anymore. He kissed her on the end of her nose. "I'll be back. Get some rest or order some food. There's petty cash in the top left drawer of my desk. You know the one. Just leave a sticky note with the amount. I'll take care of it later." He glanced at his watch. "It's 7:00 a.m. The guy got us out of bed at about 5:00 a.m. Must've wanted it dark when he attacked. I hadn't realized it was so early." He smirked. "Pizza's out of the question."

Jeni shrugged and wrapped her arms around his neck. He trembled at the feel of her breasts meshed against his chest and delighted in her exotic scent, filtering into his nostrils and pushing through the smoke clogging his nasal passage. He must stink to high heaven, but Jeni didn't seem to care. She clung to him and rubbed against him like a minx. He hardened fast as wildfire and groaned. "Better back off, or I won't be able to walk out of here without embarrassing myself."

She twisted her beautiful face into a sly grin. "Just make sure you walk back in here, in one piece." She flicked a glance downward and wiggled into him. "I kind of like your piece."

Nick had the carnal urge to take her right there in front of God and everyone. "Damn. Now I'll definitely be

embarrassed." He gave an exaggerated sigh. "But you gotta do what you gotta do." He slapped her on her butt, kissed her on her forehead, and strode off. "I'll be back."

"You better be," she called to him, and he wished he didn't have to go to a crime scene investigation, for the first time in his career.

Nick arrived on scene and relived the adrenaline rush and anxiety. God, he'd been terrified for Jeni's life. He took in the scene. Vick straddled an open manhole with her squad car, so he coasted as close as he could before stopping and exiting his vehicle.

Vick waved him over. Why was she in civilian attire? Where was her uniform? Hadn't she just gotten off shift? No, that's right. It was their normally scheduled night off. He would've remembered that if he hadn't assigned himself as Jeni's permanent protector and worked day and night on this case. He experienced a slight twinge of guilt. He'd forced Vick to ride the sidelines and pick up the pieces, like answering calls and doing paperwork and questioning victims of arson, and now this.

Nick reached his partner's side and nodded. Oddest woman he'd ever met. Butch to the max, flat chested, built like a mini-bulldozer, square and wily, yet she tried to pull off femininity. She reeked of perfume, piled on the makeup, and painted her claw-like nails. He remembered Jeni had thought her scent weird. He wrinkled his nose at the strong aroma of something unidentifiable but floral. No wonder Jeni didn't like the odor. The stuff could wither the tiny hairs inside your nose and destroy your nasal passage with the toxic gases she soaked herself in. Nick pinched his nose to keep his eyes from watering, both from the scent of smoke on him and the smell of her outrageous cologne.

"Been here long, Vick?"

Vick shook her head. "Just got here. No one heard anything or saw anything that I can determine right off the bat."

Nick looked around, wishing someone would get the lights in the area turned back on. "It's desolate in this part of the city. No one comes here."

Except thugs and murderers. A surge of hatred twisted in his gut.

Vick nodded and stiffened. "You write down a statement?"

"Yep. Had the two girls write one out, too. Layla and Jeni. You can review the testimonies when you go to the office."

Vick's eyes narrowed, but she kept her mouth closed tight in a thin line. Probably seething over his dismissal of her when she'd made an unwanted pass at him the last time. Was she jealous of Jeni and the time he spent with her? Too bad. She better get used to it. He liked Jeni, and she needed him. He needed her, too.

Vick was an oddity, and a bit of a nuisance, but he had to trust her with his life. She was his backup. Somehow, that didn't settle so well with him as it had when he'd first been teamed up with her. He'd have to think about asking for a new partner. If you couldn't trust the one you were with, you needed a new one. That simple. That deadly.

Nick finished the investigation, taking notes and discussing the disaster area with his fellow officers, trying to get a feel for their opinion on who might be behind these attacks, or at least what kind of person would do such a thing. Not that he didn't know. He'd spent enough time on the force to know the types of criminals out there, but he needed specifics, and help, even if he didn't like asking for it.

He spent two hours dealing with the scene, then left the others to clean up the rubble. He wanted to get back to Jeni. He didn't like leaving her alone, even if she wasn't truly alone, but surrounded by his fellow officers. He didn't feel right about all this. This wasn't the last of the crimes. He'd bet his hat on that, his cowboy hat. He smiled. Would Jeni ride him again? He'd bet his hat on that, too, and he couldn't wait.

Anticipation settled into Nick's lap as he drove to the station. He'd get Jeni and take her home. He'd work out his frustration in bed. Of course, he'd take a shower first. Then he'd have hot, sweaty sex with Jeni. Then he'd take another shower, with her. And so on. He smiled, wide.

His smile faltered. He couldn't spend as much time enjoying Jeni as he'd like. He needed to put together some semblance of a list of information and try to work out what he had so far in an organized fashion. What was he missing? There had to be something he could go on and use to figure this out, before anyone else got hurt.

He'd keep trying the owners of *Carpathia,* too. They needed to get their butts back here and get this mess cleared up. Surely they'd be able to help him identify the creep trying to fry seven innocent women. Nick took the steps into the station in a lunge, two at a time. He headed for the break room. He halted inside the doorway. Jeni had curled up on the couch and fallen asleep. She looked like an angel. He grinned to himself. She could be anything but angelic. She could be as sexy and sensual as sin.

Gazing at her now, as she slept like a baby, tenderness swamped him. It swept through him like a brushfire in a high wind. He knelt beside her and tucked a wisp of wayward silken strands behind her tiny ear. Leaning over, he breathed in her scent. Closing his eyes, he touched his lips to her delicate cheek.

Jeni stirred and stretched. Her eyes fluttered open, and she stilled, gazing into Nick's face, so close to her own. Nick couldn't resist. His lips met hers and lingered, a simple touching of her sweet mouth. He moved back. He couldn't let himself get carried away in the break room. No telling who'd barge in, and he didn't want to embarrass Jeni by caressing her where he wanted to and having some cop walk in on them getting frisky.

Jeni blinked and sat up. She tugged her shirttail down and straightened her clothes, fidgeting a little. He took her hand and helped her up. "Let's go home."

She nodded, and a tremor ran through her fingers and zapped him with electricity. She clenched his hand and held on tight. "What's next?"

Nick glanced her way, leading her through the throng of officers, speaking to each in greeting as he exited the building. "Rest, I'd say. I need to compile a chronological list

of what's happened, who's been involved and on scene, and the victims' names and addresses and such. Maybe if I do that, something will click."

Nick let Jeni through the front door of precinct ahead of him, and she descended the steps, practically joined at his hip. He'd plastered her there, his arm now wrapped around her waist instead of linking their hands. He couldn't get her close enough. He'd feared losing her tonight in that destructive, underground explosion. The blast jarred some sense into him. He cared about her, a lot. He wanted her within reaching distance and in his sight. Hell, he wanted her glued to his damn side, but instead he deposited her in his passenger seat.

"Can I help, Nick?"

Nick looked down at her. The dark circles under her eyes told him she needed sleep. He did, too, but he needed to do his job more. He needed to end this. So he shook his head. "I can handle it." He let his fingertips drift over her tender face. "You rest."

Jeni did as he asked, even in the car. Her breathing was deep and even. She leaned her head back on the seat, released the knob to lower the headrest to a more comfortable position, and napped during the drive.

Nick parked the car, circled the hood, and lifted her out of her seat. She protested with a mild squeak, but he hushed her. "Let me take care of you, baby."

She held his gaze for a moment with droopy eyelids. Then she let her head fall limp against his chest. He opened the door with one hand and kicked it shut with a foot. He turned the deadbolt and carried her into the bedroom. He drew the covers down, laid her on the bed, and pulled the covers back up. He wanted to climb right in beside her, but he refused to give in to that raging desire. He had work to do. The sooner the better. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. She sighed and snuggled further under the bedspread and curled into a ball. Nick bet she was out like a light before he left he room.

He headed for the shower and glanced back her way. He smiled. Yep. Zonked.

His smile widened. He'd find an interesting way to wake her, later.

* * * *

Jeni woke to darkness. Nick had allowed her to snooze and waste a lot of time. She glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Nine p.m. Goodness. What had gotten into her? How could she have slept the day away? She rose, stretched, stumbled into the bathroom, brushed her teeth, and washed her face. Where was Nick? Surely he wasn't still compiling some list?

Jeni went in search of the man who'd looked like he wanted to ravish her but had let her slumber instead. She trembled. The fire she'd seen in his eyes haunted her. The way her skin had crawled with awareness when she'd woken in the break room to see him staring into her eyes with such penetrating intensity had made her swoon.

She swooned again now. Nick sat in the dim light on her living room sofa. His laptop sat on his thighs, and he wore no shoes, a clinging T-shirt, and old jeans, unsnapped. She gulped at the mouthwatering sight and raised her eyes to a less disconcerting area of his body. He sported a scruffy five o'clock shadow and a hard look in his eyes as he glared at the laptop like he'd rather toss it out the window than use it for making a list.

She smiled and came to him. He looked up when she stood in front of him. "You look like your eyes might be crossed by now. Tell me you haven't been at it all this time." She sank down next to him and angled toward him. "Do you need a break? Something to eat? Help? A second set of eyes and ears and an extra brain?"

She let her hand drift over his shoulder. He narrowed his eyes. "All of the above. There doesn't seem to be anything I can see here that makes any sense or gives me any leads. I wish the owners of *Carpathia* would answer their stinkin' phone and shed some light on this infernal mess."

Jeni leaned against his shoulder and scanned the list. "Start from the top. Let's see what we can see."

Nick looked at her, sighed, and hit shutdown. "I've got a better idea. Let's eat. Out."

Jeni scooted back. "Really?"

Nick closed his laptop and pulled her off the couch with him. "Really. Where would you like to go?"

Jeni glanced down at herself. "Nowhere, looking like this. I just climbed out of bed. I'm a wreck."

Nick moved into her, embraced her, and held her at her neck and the small of her back. "You look edible."

Jeni shivered. Nick drew back and pierced her with his eyes. He trailed a hand down her back and a row of kisses

across her brows. She chuckled. "So do you, but it wouldn't give us much sustenance, to nibble on each other."

Jeni felt Nick shuddered at the prospect. He gave her a lopsided smirk. "Maybe not, but it'd be a hell of an appetizer."

Jeni moved her hands from his waist to his chest and pushed. "Down, boy. We need fuel if we're gonna be looking at evidence this evening." Jeni wagged her brows up and down. "And I'm gonna ride a bull later."

Nick choked out, "When did I metamorphasize from cowboy to bull?"

Jeni winked. "Last night when you made love to me. Or maybe you showed me stud horse. I don't know." She shrugged, and Nick laughed. "Anyway, today, you exhibited your bull-headedness by sitting here making lists for more hours than were sensible."

Nick laid a hand on her cheek and let his thumb swipe over her lower lip in a soft whisper of touch. "You're good for me, you know."

The heat slid through her, and her body quaked. "I hope so. I'd hate to be bad for you, or dangerous to you." She used his shirt to pull him closer, her hands twisted in the cotton material of the V-collar. "Now. Let's eat. I'll go freshen up. I'll only be a minute." Over her shoulder, she tossed, "Hey, bring the laptop. Maybe we can find someplace more interesting to go over all that data you compiled."

"Where?"

Jeni shrugged and yelled down the hall, "I don't know. Let me think on it a bit. Just bring the computer." Within minutes, Jeni was whisked out the door by Nick, his arm draped around her shoulders. He settled her in on her side. She smirked, enjoying his chivalry. No date she'd ever been with had opened her car door for her, but Nick assisted her inside his vehicle each and every time they went somewhere. She sighed as he rounded the front of the car. He was so damn gorgeous, charming, and dangerous to her future plans. She wanted to toss her rule book and rigid agenda out the proverbial window.

Nick hopped in. "Where to?"

Jeni reached for the laptop and held it for him. "How about the pizza place you took me and Sarah to?"

Nick cast her a sidelong glance. "You sure? We could go someplace nicer."

Jeni shook her head. "Nope. I kind of liked the joint. Anyway, I like watching the kids play and hearing them giggle."

Nick pulled away from her driveway and headed down the street. "You like kids?"

Jeni nodded. "Sure. Who doesn't?"

Nick shrugged. "Lots of people, I'd imagine."

Jeni studied him. "You've probably seen a lot of abuse in your time as a cop, huh?"

Nick gave a stiff nod. "Worst part of my job."

They rode in silence for a few minutes. The pizza place came into view, and Jeni wished she could enjoy more time in companionable quiet. No time, though. Nick parked and came to her side of the car. She waited. Nick took the laptop from her and led her into the building, hands linked. He grabbed them a booth, but instead of sitting across from her, he scooted in next to her. "We both need to see the screen."

Jeni nodded. She didn't mind his closeness. She enjoyed it, in fact. His woodsy, masculine cologne worked wonders on her mood. She relaxed and leaned into him, looking over his shoulder. The screen came on, and Nick pulled up a file. She whistled. "Wow. That's an extensive list. You've been busy."

Nick shrugged and waved a waitress over. "You want that vegetarian getup you ordered the other day?"

Jeni lifted her chin in mock smugness. "You bet. I'm trying to maintain my girlish figure."

Nick dragged his eyes down her body, and Jeni blushed. The waitress waited and winked knowingly. He handed the menus to the waitress. "One small veggie and one medium meat lovers." The waitress nodded, wrote, and left. Nick turned to brush his fingers over Jeni's face. She trembled at his warm touch and the intense look in his devastating eyes. "There's nothing girly about your shape. You're all woman."

Jeni stared at him, his gaze capturing hers and pinning her to her seat. She wanted to wiggle and fidget. Instead, she smiled. "We'll never get anywhere this way."

Nick gave her a mischievous arch of his brows. "Yes, we will. Just not with the list."

Jeni laughed. There might be tension, but it wasn't the stifling kind. It was the anticipatory kind. She wanted to drag him home and never leave the bedroom. "You're such a flirt."

"That I am." He turned back to the screen and scrolled down. "Here's what I've got so far." Nick pointed at the list.

"Discovered seven women in manhole; six alive; one expired; each woman kidnapped one day apart; taken near *Carpathia*."

"Do we know that for sure?"

Nick nodded and accepted the drinks from Jill, the waitress, according to her name tag. He handed Jeni hers. "Yeah. Except for the one who didn't survive, all of them told me they'd been taken from that area or shortly after leaving it. So the perp has some grudge against *Carpathia*, probably the owners."

Jeni twisted her drink in her hands. "Women leaving those places are such easy targets for some idiot to hit over the head and nab, especially if they're drunk."

Nick seemed to consider that. "You weren't drunk." He looked away, his jaw flexing and twitching. "My fiancée wasn't drunk."

Jeni almost choked on her soda. "Your what?"

Nick glanced at her and gripped his glass, his knuckles turning white. "My fiancée. Isabella." Nick shifted toward Jeni. "She's why I freak out at the mention of *Carpathia*. You still want to know about that?"

Now more than ever. "Yes."

Nick took a deep breath. "She went with friends, including my brothers' wives, the ones you met, Lori and Sherri. They were having a bachelorette party. So was I, a bachelor party, that is. Gang members followed her to the same spot where I found you."

"That's why you were there that night?"

Nick nodded and went stiff as a board. "It was the anniversary of her death. They shot her in the head and set

her car on fire. By the time I arrived on scene, there was nothing left but charred metal and..."

Nick swallowed hard, his eyes wide. Jeni touched his arm. The muscles flexed under her fingers. "You don't have to go on if you don't want to."

Nick shook his head. "Yes, I do. She burned to a crisp, and they spray-painted obscenities all over the wall of the building behind her. Black paint. Just like your name on the sidewalk after those houses were set ablaze." Nick's Adam's apple bobbed, and he took a fortifying breath. "I was a cop, but not in homicide. I switched right after that. I figured I could get over her loss, and my guilt for not being there for her, by finding murderers."

Jeni could hardly stand the look of sadness in his eyes. She caressed his arm, and he flinched. "You feel guilty, just as I did. I think you know how useless that is, and unnecessary. It's not your fault, just as it wasn't my fault my parents died."

Nick sighed. "I know that now. I hope you do, too. I need to move on." He pierced her with his eyes, his pupils dilated to onyx orbs. "*We* need to move on."

Jeni pulled her hand back. She knew that, but moving on didn't mean giving up her goals. She had a degree to finish and a job to obtain. Her time would have to end with Nick soon. That's all there was to it. She couldn't afford the distraction. She had to ride this thing out, the case, and hope he caught the homicidal maniac soon, but then she needed to focus and get back to her studies. And that was that.

Nick must've sensed her change in mood. He glared at her. "Jeni?" Jeni sat up straighter. Time for a change of subject. "What else do you have on your list?"

Nick narrowed his eyes. "Okay. If that's the way you want it, but we'll get back to this topic later." He flipped the screen back on. "Jeni, number seven, left untouched since incident; Sarah, number six, house burnt, husband murdered then burnt; Barb, number five, house burnt; Layla, number four, kidnapped and stuck back in manhole with explosives; Amy Dunn, number three, still unharmed; Sheila Weber, still unharmed; Mary Ellen Richards, deceased."

Jeni sipped her soda and pointed. "Pizza's headed our way."

Nick scooted the computer across the table so it remained open but out of the way so the waitress could deposit the food. Nick took a bite and talked around a mouth full of cheese and meat. "So who might have a reason for revenge against Jeni, the owner?"

Jeni shook her head and laughed. "Didn't anyone ever tell you talking with your mouth full is bad manners?"

Nick nodded, took a bite, and issued a garbled, "My mama. Many times. Didn't take, though."

He kept right on chewing and smiling. Jeni giggled and bit into her own thick slice. She chewed and swallowed. "Lord. That's good stuff."

Nick chuckled. "Best pizza place in town." He indicated the screen. "What do you think? You have no connections to the place, right? *Carpathia?*"

Jeni shook her head. "No. I'd never been there before. Sarah hadn't either, and you said none of the others knew anyone at the place personally, none of the workers, that is."

"Leaves the possible motive as *grudge*. Could be new, or old. You know what they say. Revenge served cold is the best."

Jeni shuddered. "Yeah, but why not just go after the owner? Why make people like me suffer? I didn't hurt anybody."

Nick stopped chewing, wrinkled his brow, and looked pensive. "Don't know. Maybe wants to make the owner look bad. Might be trying to frame this Jeni."

Jeni took a drink of root beer and contemplated that idea. "Makes sense. Now we just need to know why the sick jerk wants to do that, in order to figure out who's behind this mess."

Nick shut down the laptop. "Damn. I wish the owners would get back or answer the phone."

"They're on vacation, Nick. They're probably blocking and ignoring all calls."

"But I've told them on voice mail how urgent it is." "Were you specific?"

Nick sighed and shook his head. "No. I don't want to do that. Someone else could get a hold of the phone, and that messes with confidentiality. Plus, who knows? They might've actually lost their phone."

Jeni patted her belly. "I'm stopping now. I'm not gonna stuff myself like I did the last time. I have plans for later, and they don't include waddling or rolling. Well, maybe rolling, but definitely not waddling."

Nick stood and tossed a twenty on the table. "Do they include riding?"

Jeni scooted toward the edge of the seat, and Nick reached for her hand. He pulled her up and clung to her hand. He tugged her against him. She wiggled her brows up and down. "That they do."

Nick grabbed his computer. "Then let's get the hell out of here. I like your plans."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Eighteen

Jeni had never been one to live for the moment and embrace impulse, but the affair she'd embarked upon with Nick would be an exception to her long-lived rule. She'd decided to enjoy what she knew would be a short time with this sexy man and make the memories last forever.

As they drove toward her home, Nick reached over and grasped her hand, linking his fingers in hers. She sighed. How warm he felt and how strong. She smiled at him, and he glanced at her and winked. She shivered in anticipation, and the heat dove all the way to her socks. She'd become a wanton woman. Ever since their first bout of lovemaking, she'd craved his touch and the way he made her feel.

Nick rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb, and she trembled. Goose pimples rose on her arms, and she ran her fingers absently across the skin of her forearm. She forced herself to remain very still and breathe as evenly as possible. She didn't want Nick to know how much he affected her. She wanted to remain calm, cool and collected, and not let on she was about to come in her pants, even though he hadn't really even touched her yet. How could a soft caress do that to a woman?

Nick pulled into the driveway, put the vehicle in park, and shut off the key. Jeni reached for the door handle, and Nick reached for her, tugging their linked hands toward him and using his free hand to wrap around her neck and draw her toward his waiting, seeking lips. She gasped, and he took advantage of her open mouth. He devoured her, running his tongue along the inside of her mouth. She tasted his desire, his need, and her own need surged to a level of quiet desperation. Moisture pooled between her thighs, and she couldn't get enough of his taste, his touch, his essence. Jeni wrapped her arms around his waist and yanked him closer, but he growled and pulled away. "Inside, sweetheart. Now. I'll come around. Wait."

She nodded and fisted her hands. Goodness, but she'd almost let him take her right there in front of her house, for everyone to see, out in the open, the dangerous open. She hadn't been thinking, only feeling, but Nick had. He'd kept his wits. Thank God.

Nick opened the door on the passenger side and lifted her from her seat. He kicked the door shut with his foot and headed for the house, her in his massive arms. She felt light in his grasp, but she knew she wasn't. Nick made her weight seem like that of a feather and made her feel sexy. Something she'd never thought she'd feel in her lifetime.

At her front door, Nick halted and hoisted her up onto his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She giggled, and he patted her butt and laughed. She heard the keys jingle as he inserted into them into the lock. She wished he'd hurry up. "Sure you don't want to put me down, Nick? This would go a little quicker if you had two hands."

"I have two hands. And they're both busy." Nick massaged her sensitive backside, and heat ran through her blood. "Point taken." She reached her hand down and squeezed his firm rear end. He groaned and spanked her. "Hey," Jeni yelped. "That's not right. Cut that out."

"Behave yourself. We're still in public." Nick's deep voice always thrilled her. Now was no exception. Even if she was tossed over his shoulder, in public, such as it was on her quiet street.

"That's like the pot calling the kettle black, isn't it? You have me slumped over your shoulder, and you smacked my bottom, but I'm supposed to behave. Humph." Jeni slapped his backside to emphasize her point, and Nick paid her back with a vengeance. He stuck his thumb right between her legs, and Jeni sucked in a shocked breath. "Nick," she choked out. "Get that damn door open. Now."

Nick laughed, his head thrown back. "I'm trying. Your wiggling is distracting me, wench."

"Wench? I'll show you wench." Jeni twisted her body around on Nick's back, licked her finger, and stuck it in his ear.

"Shit." Nick yanked his head away and pushed the door back. It slammed against the wall, and he stepped into the entryway, kicking the door closed with his foot and locking it, quickly. "You're going to pay for that."

"Promises. Promises," she told him, her words as husky and sultry as she could make them.

"I keep them." Nick grabbed her thighs with both hands. Pulling her down to the floor, he wrapped his arms around her waist, and his mouth came down on hers, hard and punishing, but not. His kiss tortured her and thrilled her at the same time. A few weeks ago, Jeni would never have imagined this kind of sensuality. She never would've believed she had it in her to be anything but sedate and studious. Not that she'd never had fun in her life, but it'd been a different kind of fun, indeed. Nothing this erotic, and tantalizing, and amazing. God, she'd miss Nick when this crazy summer fling, as she thought of it now, ended abruptly with the solving of the case.

No. She wouldn't think of that now. She'd live, and feel, and act. And treasure the memory of Nick.

* * * *

Nick thought he might explode with wanting if he didn't get inside Jeni, right now. He'd gotten the bright idea of slinging her over his shoulder, thinking he'd drag her into his cave her house—and ravish her. She'd turned the tides and tortured him on her damn front porch. Anyone watching from behind closed doors and pulled back curtains like some Peeping Tom could've chosen to sneak a peek at what went on at the insane next door neighbor's house.

He didn't give a damn. He couldn't care less who watched. He had every intention of doing more of this open display of affection as time went on. He wanted to keep Jeni, if she'd have him.

He ripped his mouth from hers, surged to his feet, picked her up, and cradled her in his arms, kissing her as he headed for her bedroom. She kissed him back, twisted her fingers in his shirt, and held him close. Her desperation matched his, and he knew she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Thank God.

He sank down on the bed with her on his lap and kept working at her mouth. He couldn't fathom ever getting enough of her taste. It was intoxicating, like a drug he'd never be able to survive the withdrawals from.

Nick lifted his mouth from hers, wanting to taste her elsewhere. He licked his tongue down her long, salty, slim neckline. She writhed and threw her head back, moaning. "Nick, I want you."

Nick murmured, "I want you, too."

Jeni reached between them, their bodies close, and tried to unfasten his fly. "Now."

Nick shook his head. "No. Let me taste you. And touch you." Nick ran his hand up under her shirt and let his fingernails drift over her breast. She hissed, and Nick watched her face. Her eyes clamped closed, and she shuddered in his arms. "God, you're so beautiful."

She kept her eyes closed and shook her head. "No, I'm not. Not really. Not like model beautiful."

Nick tightened his grip on her breast, and her eyes flew open. He tucked his other thumb under her chin. "I don't want model beautiful. They're too damn skinny. I want wholesome but erotic, real but sensual. That's you. The whole package."

She blushed crimson and bit her lip. Nick lapped his tongue out and tasted the shy gesture. She clenched her fists against his chest. "How can you devastate me with just a touch of your mouth or hands on me? Is feeling this way normal?"

Nick chuckled. "Normal wouldn't exactly be the word I'd use to describe the way I feel with you."

She held her gaze to his. "Do you mean it when you say things like that? Or do you say them to every woman you're with?"

He drew his brows together. "What makes you think I've been anything but honest with you?"

She shrugged and looked away, but then swung her eyes back to his. "Nothing, but you don't have to say things like that to me, unless you mean them." She shrugged again but missed her marked if she'd tried for casual. "Actually, you don't have to say things like that to me even then." She smiled with a quiver to her upturned lips. "I'm a sure thing. You know I'll sleep with you, sweet nothings whispered in my ear, or not."

"Damn it, Jeni." Nick shoved her gently off his lap and stood. "That's not what this is about." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Not completely. I want you, of course, but I like you, too. I care about you."

Jeni's eyes widened. "Okay." She stood and moved toward him, wrapping her arms around his middle. "Can we get back to where we started, especially since I like you, too?"

She lifted onto her tiptoes and sucked on his neck, right over his pulse point. Fire raced through his system and set him ablaze. His breath shuddered out. "I guess we can. You're pretty persuasive." She raked her fingertips down his ribs, and his whole body quaked. He set his jaw and tried to maintain his rigid stance and not melt into molten lava. She turned him on more than any woman he'd ever been with, and he didn't want to think about those other women. He'd have to let her know how precious she was to him soon, though, in words. For now, actions would have to do the job.

He stripped her shirt over her head and tossed it aside. His followed, adding to the pile that soon consisted of every garment they'd worn. When they were naked, Nick stepped back. Still a little self-conscious with all the lights on and in full daylight, apparently, Jeni's hands automatically drifted up to cover herself, but he reached out and held her wrists. "Don't. Let me look."

She linked her fingers in his and smiled somewhat timidly, a slight curve of her full, swollen-from-his-kiss lips. She released one of his hands and twirled in front of him, obviously getting over her shyness with his continued approval. She pirouetted like a porcelain doll on a music box, her delicate skin matching the beauty of her fluid movements, except her skin wasn't porcelain. It was a deep tan and looked healthier and lovelier than any he'd ever had the privileged of viewing or caressing before.

He knelt before her and grasped her thighs. She touched his head on both sides and ran her fingers through his hair, her eyes wary and curious. He pushed his fingers between her legs and watched her face gloss over with a pink flush of passion and need. She shivered and bit her lip, but kept her eyes locked to his as he moved his fingers back and forth, in and out. He pulled the moisture from inside her, used it to move over her femininity fluidly, and felt her tremble.

He took her by her ankles and opened her legs more for him. She held his head to brace herself. Her legs vibrated, and Nick knew she was close to ecstasy. He pushed her down onto the bed, opening her womanhood to him completely. She spread before him like a tasty dish to savor, and she lay shaking, eyes closed now, waiting. His fingers were still inside her core, and he lowered his mouth to her honeyed nub. *Nope.* Tasting her was something he'd never get enough of. Not in this lifetime. Not if he had an eternity.

Jeni wrapped her legs around his shoulders and lifted her craving sensitivity into his mouth. He groaned and hoped he could hold out. He was hard as a rock and aching, but he enjoyed pleasuring her as much he enjoyed taking pleasure from her, so he kept up his ministrations, until her body clenched. She shattered around him, her hands clasping his head, her heels digging into his shoulder blades. God, she was glorious.

Nick rose to his feet and gave her only an instant to open her eyes and look at him. "Hold, on honey. We're going for a ride."

She grinned and grabbed onto to the edge of the bed. He slammed into her with all his might. She writhed beneath him and matched him thrust for thrust, bucking her hips up and into him, allowing him full access to her heat. He reached for the orgasm, but then he held back, until she dug her nails into his back and screamed, "Now, Nick. Let go. Come with me." He fell onto her chest and poured himself into her, emptying his mind, body and soul of every dread he'd clung to over the past year. He needed Jeni like the air he breathed. He'd have to convince her there was more to life than a PhD, and guilt. He knew that now, and he'd have to convince her of that, too. He wouldn't survive the loss of another woman, especially not *this* woman.

Jeni's arms flopped to the side. "I think I've died and gone to Heaven."

Nick chuckled. "Not Heaven, but pretty close to it. At any rate, you're still alive. I can feel your heart pounding."

Jeni giggled. "Are you sure? I mean. My arms are like Jell-O. Legs, too. I can't imagine my pulse rate being up."

Nick scoffed. "Yeah, right. Just because your bones feel like mush, just like mine do right now—which is why I haven't moved my heavy body off yours—it doesn't mean you're relaxed."

"What does it mean?" Jeni cupped his face when he reared back to look into her shimmering eyes.

"It means we just had mind-numbing, body-paralyzing sex." Nick kissed her on the end of her nose. "And we're about to do it again, but this time, it'll be in the shower, so we can sort of clean up in the process, or at the end." Nick pulled her up with him as he stood. He steadied her when she nearly toppled over.

"My legs feel like spaghetti."

Nick swung her up into his embrace. "Mine, too, but it feels damn good, and they'll still hold up both of us, now and in the shower." Jeni trickled her hand lightly down the sensitive skin of his back. "I love a man with stamina."

Nick almost halted in his steps, but he realized she didn't mean she loved him. Not really. It was a figure of speech. He set her down by the tub and turned on the faucet. Half joking, half hoping, he declared, "In that case, you're gonna love me."

Something stirred in her expression, but she hid it quickly behind her mask of joviality. "Come on, cowboy. I promised you a ride. I think it'll still count if you're standing, like a bucking bronco."

Nick picked her up and landed her in the shower. Warm water sprayed over both of them when he joined her. "Oh, yeah. It counts all right."

He went to work proving he could make it count, whatever the position.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Nineteen

Dear Journal:

The bitch and asshole team have escaped me for the last time, and so have my previous victims. I'm tired of letting the prick and those women slip through my fingers. It'll not happen again. One way or the other, they're all going down, and that bitch at Carpathia will get hers, too.

They'll all pay in the end. Nick and the two Jenis and the surviving victims that keep thwarting my efforts. I'll finish what I began. I always do. Starting with the next bitch and her family I'm about to silence.

Amy Dunn.

I'll have to go in and shut her parents up, first. I'll tie them and gag them and make sure they keep their mouths shut. But I won't let them see me. I'll take them out while they sleep, with tear gas and chloroform.

Then Nick will know I mean business, but it'll be too late. The horny son of a bitch. He thinks he can stop me, but he's wrong. I'll run right through him on my way to victory and vengeance. I'll kill Amy, right in front of him. I want him to see he can't beat me. Then I'll kill him.

And then I'll be able to get to Jeni easier. The bitch. If he'd just stayed away from her and made it easy for me, I could've allowed him to escape my wrath. Why is she so important to warrant his undivided attention, anyway? Why does she deserve cops parked outside her house all hours of the day and night, and Nick perched inside her home, like a cock in the hen house, crowing like a rooster when he comes for her, if I had my guess.

The whore. He has to be doing her.

Well, that will come to an abrupt halt. Soon.

Nick will die like a dog, bleeding on Amy's front lawn. I'll win. As usual.

I want to see him squirm, even if it has to be from a distance. I can't risk getting too close and having him take me out. I'd love to see his face up close, though, when I snuff out his life's spark. But I can't take the chance. I don't really care if he knows it's me, anyway. I just want him dead and out of the way. And I want to slit that's whore Jeni's throat. She should've kept her legs closed and stayed away from Nick. Now I'm gonna shred that tight hole of hers with a very large knife. She'll regret every moment of Nick humping her, and she'll wish she'd died in that manhole I shoved her in in the first place.

Nick will pay, and she will, too, along with all the others, one by one. I'll finish what I started, and I'll frame Jeni, the slut at Carpathia, just as I planned from the get go. One way or the other, I'll make it look like she did all this.

I can't fail. I won't fail. I must prevail.

Let the suffering continue.

* * * *

The phone on the bedside table rang, jarring Nick out of a deep sleep. Jeni's arm clamped around him, but she didn't speak. Through slitted eyelids, he registered darkness outside the drawn back curtains in Jeni's bedroom, and he glanced at the clock. He sighed and kissed Jeni on the cheek. He reached for the portable hand-held unit, forgetting it was Jeni's phone, not his, he answered, not even considering she might not want anyone to know he slept in her bed. He growled, "This better be damn important at five in the damn morning."

A sinister laugh had Nick jerking up in bed. The disguised voice was unrecognizable, but Nick knew who it belonged to nonetheless, or at least he wished he could identify exactly who it was. The voice scratched into the receiver, promising, "It is important, if you consider trying to save the life of another victim of any value."

"What the hell are you trying to pull now, you dumb shit?" Nick spat in to the phone.

A shriek sounded and nearly split Nick's eardrums.

"Shut up, you horny bastard, and listen to me. Get your ass over to Amy's house ASAP. Let me see you pull this one off and survive another stay of execution, via me."

"Why? What..." Nick broke off at the cruel blare of a dial tone in response to his demands.

Jeni sat facing him, the covers pulled up to her chin. She trembled, and he hated the look in her beautiful, frightened eyes. He'd kill the prick just to erase that look. "Who?"

Nick threw the covers back. "Amy."

Jeni started jerking on her clothes. Nick did the same. "I guess you think you're going with me."

Jeni kept dressing. "No thinking about it. I'm going. I'll duck. Again."

Nick shook his head, but he didn't refuse her. She wouldn't listen, anyway. Stubborn as she was, she'd follow him in her

own damn car. "Fine. But you do only *what* I tell you *when* I tell you. Including waiting here until I come back inside for you. I need to get some things from my car and call my boss."

"You're calling in backup this time?" Jeni looked hopeful.

Nick nodded. "Yeah, but they'll be in the background. If I know our perp, he'll go nuts if he sees anyone with me."

Nick headed for his trunk, got his gear, and prepared for battle, gun holsters around his shoulder and waist, and a knife hidden in his boot, just in case the fight got up close and personal. Might as well load for bear. Who knew what the freak would be up to this go-round?

Within minutes, he drove down Amy's street, having gotten her address from her file. He glanced up and down the street as he neared her home. So quiet and peaceful. People slept, resting up for work and normality. He drove toward madness.

Nothing could've prepared him for what he saw in Amy's front yard. Amy laid spread eagle, naked, tied on her front porch, her wrists and ankles attached to the rails at the top and bottom of the steps. He cursed a blue streak.

Jeni had slumped down into the floorboard of his car, and she started to lift her head for a peek. He pushed her head back down. "No."

"What is it?"

"She's tied up and sprawled for all the world to see, which they will in a few minutes. It's time for people to rise and shine, along with the sun. It's coming up over the horizon as we speak. The son of a bitch has good timing." Nick scanned the near vicinity. Where could this guy be? How far away? Could he be on a roof, behind a tree, inside the house? Nick had no way of knowing which direction to face or how to protect himself from an unseen danger.

He drew in a breath and looked at Jeni. She had that deerin-the-headlights look of pure terror in her eyes. He reached over and tried to console her, his hand on her delicate face. "It's okay. Stay down."

Jeni placed her hand on his as he caressed her jaw line. "I doubt she cares a whit about being naked right now. She probably thinks she's about to die." She gripped his hand tighter. "Please, be careful. Come back to me."

Nick wanted to kiss her, but it'd give her presence away if his talking to her hadn't already done that. He exited the vehicle and did a full turn, his gun in front of him. He headed for Amy. She saw him and started to squirm and attempt to break free from her constraints. He ordered, "Hold still."

He crouched low and kept moving forward. Amy tried to say something behind her gag, and her eyes darted to the left, repeatedly. Nick turned and saw the flash. He moved instinctively, throwing his body in front of the exposed, unprotected Amy.

The impact shocked him, and he grunted at the pain and rolled with the punch of it. He lay still, hearing running feet in two directions. One set was off to his left, where the shot had come from, and the other was off to his right.

Jeni?

A succession of shots split the air, and he tried to turn his body over and rise to his feet. His vision blurred, then faded completely, but he remained awake and aware of gentle hands on him. Jeni's voice penetrated his groggy mind. She talked to someone, but it didn't seem to be him. "Yes, I'm still here. Please, send an ambulance and the police right away. There's an officer down."

He tried to move, but she pushed him back down, rubbing gently at the back of his head. "Stay still, Nick." Her voice hitched, and then she said, "No, he's not dead, but he will be if you don't get the hell over here, fast."

* * * *

Jeni almost had a heart attack when Nick flung himself forward, then fell to the ground like a limp, lifeless lump. She knew he'd been shot, and she grabbed the gun she'd brought—her gun, the one Nick didn't know she'd stuck in her back belt loop and covered with her short-sleeved jeans jacket—and ran for him. She'd seen movement, and aimed and fired. She must've scared the son of a bitch because he took off at a dead run.

Now Nick's motionless body lie very still, and his skin was clammy and cold. "Nick? Can you hear me?" She touched him tentatively, rubbing his shoulder. "Nick? Please, answer me with a nod or a grunt if you hear me."

His head bobbed, and she thrilled with the realization he remained conscious. She ran her hand under his shirt, moving over his chest, checking for blood ... and she met with solid, hard material. "Oh, God, you're wearing a vest?"

Nick groaned and tried to turn over. She helped him, and she blanched when she saw his beet red face, but no blood

flowed onto the grass. She kissed him hard on the lips. He flinched when she came into contact with his sore ribs and chest, but she laughed. "You jerk. I thought you were dead. I thought..."

She choked off the words, tears clogging her throat and closing off her airway. She lay down next to him and listened as the emergency vehicles came into hearing distance. Within minutes, the place swarmed with EMTs, cops and reporters. The first officer on scene untied Amy and rushed her inside. Nosy neighbors circled the barricade, and Jeni sat next to Nick on the tailgate of an ambulance, watching the chaos. "We'll have to question Amy and her family. Maybe they can give us something."

Vick scoffed. "Doubt it. The mom and pop are knocked out cold, and the girl's shaking, blubbering, and whining about being scared out of her mind. She won't be lucid for a while."

Nick glared at Vick, and Jeni wanted to pummel her.

She was so cold and heartless. How could she be a cop and care so little? She was certainly nothing like Nick. She didn't act like she cared at all, not about Nick or the victims, or anything or anyone. At that moment, Jeni hated Vick, as much as she could hate anyone, except for whoever did this to her and Nick and the others. That person she hated more than anyone. He'd almost killed the man she loved with all her mind, body and soul. The man she now knew she wanted to hold onto if she had the guts, and ability, to convince him there was more to life than being a cop, and harboring guilt, and seeking revenge.

There was love, and she'd found it. With Nick.

* * * *

Dear Journal:

Who knew the twit had it in her to pull a trigger and try to kill me? I'm actually starting to like this bitch, but not enough to let her live. I can't believe she shot at me. I still have to take her out. My sense of justice won't allow her to live. But damn if I don't admire her.

The other sniveling witches are another story. They whine and beg. But not Jeni. She's different. She's tough. She's full of fire. Maybe before I kill her, I'll have her. Maybe I should find a way to enjoy her, other than enjoying her death.

Maybe I can even find a way to make Nick watch. It'd serve him right. He's messed up my plans too many times, and now his whore's in on the interruption of my setups.

Shit. I couldn't believe it when she jumped out of that car and came up, gun blazing. She looked like a goddess, her hair all tumbled and sticking straight up, flowing in the breeze.

My blood stirs as I picture it. I want her even now, hours later. I've masturbated twice, and I'm horny again. Might as well drop my pants and get a quick thrill, without her aid. But I'll have her, and then I'll kill her, unless she finds a way to get out of that, too.

Almost makes me smile to think of just how she might try to thwart me. Makes me almost come without even my own touch, to think she might escape me again. I'm grinning like a maniac at the thrill of the chase, but when I catch her, she'll know it, and she won't like it. Not one bit.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Twenty

For the next week, Jeni went to work with Nick. Every time he went into the station, she went with him. He refused to allow her to remain at home unattended by him. No matter that two cops had been posted outside her residence since day one of this fiasco.

She'd about reached her limit. She wanted her life back. Not that she wanted to get rid of Nick. Far from it. She just wanted routine. She needed to go the library, and she wanted to see a professor about her upcoming dissertation. She should go shopping. She hadn't bought much food since her kidnapping, except during one quick jaunt to the grocery store for milk, eggs, bread, butter, drinks and a few necessary items. Nick had accompanied her, and it'd been before the continued abductions. Now she went nowhere, except with him, to and from work. They ordered in all their meals, and supplies of everything in her home ran low.

Enough was enough. Her self-imposed—Nick-imposed prison walls were closing in on her and needed to be dismantled. She needed to inform Nick of her newfound desire for liberty.

Just as she started to announce her rebellion and form an argument, the door bell rang and silenced her protest. Her tummy did a flip flop. Anyone showing up unplanned perturbed her. She didn't like surprises, especially not the disturbing kind she'd received lately. She straightened and glanced at the door from her kitchen entryway where she leaned against the jam, sipping on her coffee with heavy cream.

Nick uncrossed his legs and unwound his long length, rising from where he sat reading the newspaper, as if he didn't have a care in the world. He tried to look nonchalant, but his stiff demeanor as he peeked out the peep hole gave his wariness away. The tension in his face ebbed quickly as he turned. "It's okay. It's Sal and John."

Jeni nodded and relaxed the death grip she had on her coffee mug. "Show them in. Should I make more coffee?"

Nick shook his head and unlatched the door chain and bolt and knob lock. "Let's see what they want first."

Sal and John came through the door first, followed by Lori and Sherri, all smiling broadly, conspiratorially, if Jeni read their expressions correctly. They headed straight for her. "We've come to rescue you, Jeni."

Jeni blinked. "From whom?"

John jabbed a thumb at Nick. "From Nick's jailhouse and the confines of it."

Jeni blushed, and a surge of guilt rushed through her. She'd been thinking she'd like her freedom, but she hadn't imagined anyone else would think of her as being on house arrest. Her gaze flicked to Nick's dark scowl.

"She's not in jail. She's under my protection."

John scoffed. "VIP as these prison walls are, she's still locked away and has been ever since this thing started, except for a few times when you both nearly got your asses wiped off the planet, and trips to the station. It's time she broke free for a few hours." Nick crossed his arms, his expression stone. "She's not going anywhere without me."

Sal shrugged. "Suits us. Either way, we're going out for breakfast. A real meal, at a real restaurant."

Lori wrapped her arm around Jeni's shoulder. "And then we're stealing her away while you go to the office, Nick. We're taking her shopping, out to lunch, and to the mall for a manicure, pedicure, a massage and any other diversion we can muster."

Nick dropped his clenched fists to his sides. "Like hell."

Sherri stepped forward and placed a hand on Nick's shoulder. "You're smothering her, Nick. She hasn't told you, I'm sure, but she needs space. She needs fresh air. Stifled, she'll go berserk with only your company."

Jeni finally found her voice. "I think you people are making too much of this situation. Of course, I'd enjoy some time out, but not to the mall or a diner. I need to do some work. I need to get in some research and study time and talk to a professor at the university."

Nick punched his fist into his open palm. "I don't think any of you are hearing me. She's not going anywhere without me."

Sal touched Sherri's elbow and gestured for her to move aside. "Okay. You're a big guy, and you're wearing a gun. But if I remember right, I used to be able to take you pretty easily in a brotherly brawl. Tell me I'm not gonna have to do that now."

Sal's wide grin gave away his good mood, even though his words indicated it was time to take a stand for Jeni's liberty.

Jeni glanced from one to the other of all five of the family members standing in her entryway. They looked friendly, except for Nick. He looked like he could eat nails and his spine would snap in two. Maybe she should try to persuade him.

She touched him on the arm. He flinched, blinked, and drilled her with a fierceness in his eyes that should've made her cringe. It didn't. It irked her to no end. She held her temper in check and slid her hand up his arm. He remained tense under her touch, but his expression turned leery instead of angry. Her voice was gritty when she suggested, "Maybe one of the police officers you have as sentries outside could follow us and keep us in their sights. We'd be okay then, especially since we'll all be together for breakfast, and then I'd be with the other four mother hens in this room for the rest of the day, along with the police officer you'd send to keep us company."

Nick narrowed his gaze. "I don't think so."

Jeni sighed and crossed her arms. "I'm not asking if I can go, Nick. I'm suggesting a way to make you more comfortable with the fact I'm going." He started to protest, and she cut him off. "I'm going. I'll do breakfast first, and then I'll see my professor, and then I'll go to the library, for about three hours." She turned to face the others. "If that sounds boring, I can go alone, with only the attendance of the police officer following my every move."

Lori grinned. "Nope. That's fine. I read like crazy. Of course, I mostly read romance, but I need a new stack of

books, so if we go to the public library, instead of your campus library, I can stock up."

John and Sal exchanged glances. "Fine by us, too, except you'll have to look for us in the horror section when you're finished gleaning knowledge from the basement, which is where I know you'll head when you get to the public library. That's where they keep the kind of stuffy bookworm manuscripts you'll be looking for."

With a toss of her red locks, Sherri added, "I'm good to go with that plan, too, as long as we still get to do the mall, nails, hair, massage, and all that good stuff after."

Jeni cringed, but she nodded. She could find a way to talk them out of *that* frivolity later. Maybe.

Sherri narrowed her eyes in accusation. "I see those cogs turning. Don't even think it. We're going, and that's final."

Jeni winced. "How did you know what I thought?"

Sherri poked her finger at Jeni's arm in a playful manner. "I just know. I use to be the same way. Always trying to be serious and never having much fun." She leaned into John. "My hubby changed all that." She smiled up at him with profound adoration. "Didn't you, sweetie?"

John blushed. "Come one, now, Sherri. Don't be so mushy in front of these guys. I'll lose my image as a hard-nosed stud."

Sal coughed and covered his mouth with his hand, feigning choking. "Whatever, buddy. Let's go. It's getting deep in here."

Nick scowled, but he followed them out, his hand at the small of Jeni's back. They took one vehicle, all of them

cramming into a van John had rented. Nick's family had obviously been certain of their persuasive powers as a cohesive unit.

They ate breakfast and engaged in comical, easy banter, for the most part. The siblings and their wives enjoyed each other and knew how to push buttons to get a reaction, but always a loving one, jabs made in good humor.

Jeni had always longed for this kind of relationship, but she'd never had it, and never would. She'd been an only child, and her parents hadn't spent much time with her extended family. She'd been too young to question why, then she'd lost her mom and dad. She'd chosen not to connect with her long, lost grandparents later on. They'd attended the funeral, then they'd left, looking grim.

There wasn't anything grim about this group. Thank God.

After a sit-down meal, Sal pulled to the curb in front of the precinct and dropped the disgruntled Nick off. He exited the van and turned to lock gazes with each person in the vehicle. "Anything happens to her, and I'll..."

John laid a hand on Nick's shoulder. "She'll be fine. We'll take care of her for you."

Nick pierced Jeni with his penetrating stare, then slammed the sliding side-door shut. He stalked inside the double glass doors of the precinct, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He didn't look happy in the least.

Sal whistled. "Boy, he's got it bad."

Jeni blinked and looked at his expression in the mirror. Sal eyed her through its reflection. "It's not what you think."

Sal winked. "How do you know what I think?"

"Well, I-I mean, I-I..."

Sal laughed, and the others stifled their chuckles. "That's what I thought. You've got it bad, too."

An hour later, Jeni had gotten advice from Professor Knox, a veritable gold mine of information about her topic, Civil War events in mid-Missouri, battles and such, involving women and their heroic and often covert actions. Three more hours, and she'd dug through several manuscripts in the dusty basement floor of the public library. She would've gotten better results if she'd spent more time alone, not worrying about who waited for her or how bored they were. She would've done better, too, if she'd searched the files of Washington University's manuscript section, instead of the public library and its humble limitations. They didn't keep as much stuff like this, intellectual reading, as universities did, and online sources weren't enough. She needed actual handwritten manuscript for her dissertation.

Jeni sighed. She'd come back later. She had the whole summer to get a head start, and as soon as Nick solved this case, she'd be free, from the perp, and from him. The panic set in. She'd miss him. She'd crave him. She'd get over him.

She had no choice.

Thirty minutes later, Jeni suffered a keen sense of déjà vu. Lori and Sherri echoed Coni and Laura. Of course, Coni and Laura had linked their arms in hers, one side and the other, and taken her for a stroll through the mall and dressed her up, then she'd gotten kidnapped in that dress. She hoped there'd be no repeat of that mess. Lori and Sherri linked arms and trotted along protectively on each side of her. Sal and John walked ahead of them, and the stern-looking police officer tailed them. She couldn't have felt more secure, unless she'd remained at home, behind those close doors she'd grown tired of. Still, something other than the camaraderie of the girls at her sides tugged at her consciousness. A strange sort of loneliness crept in and sank into her psyche. She missed Nick. She winced. Would she be able to keep him? Would she even have the courage to try to make a go of it? Or would she miss him forever?

Three hours later, they swung by and picked up Nick at the front steps where they'd dropped him off. He stopped in his tracks, coming up short and staring at Jeni as she hopped out of the van to greet him. He ran his eyes up and down her body, then whistled, surprise and something else evident in his handsome face. "Good God. They turned you into a diva."

Jeni blushed and let him turn her in a circle, inspecting her little black dress, her new haircut, and her professionally applied makeup. "Do you like it? It's too much, isn't it?"

Nick pulled her to him and whispered hoarsely in her ear, "It's never too much. Nothing could mess up your beauty, or mask it, but, honey, you don't need the makeup. You're gorgeous without it."

"Thanks. I'm glad you think so. I can't imagine wearing this stuff often. It's not me." Jeni wrapped her fingers in his shirt front, but then she stepped back. She let her gaze drift over him. "Still, same to you. I like the uniform. You look all shiny and sexy. When did you put it on? And why? You've been in plain clothes every day." "Had a meeting with the mayor." Nick pretended to gag himself with a finger in front of his mouth as if putting it down his throat. "No fun at all."

"Well, I like the dress blues, anyway." She wagged her brows up and down. "You look like a real man's man. A total hunk." She stepped to him and whispered in his ear as he'd done to her. "Ever had sex wearing it?"

Nick sucked in a breath and turned cranberry red. "No, but I'd be willing to give it a shot."

Jeni winked and tossed her head in the direction of the van. "Let's go, cowboy."

Nick patted her butt when she stepped in the van. "Yes, Ma'am."

Jeni could hardly wait for Nick's family to leave, but for some reason they asked to be allowed to come inside and hang out for awhile. They lingered, and lingered, and Jeni began to wonder. Were they doing this to aggravate her? She smiled inside. If they were, they weren't being mean. They were being sisterly and brotherly, and annoying. Either way, she wanted to be alone with Nick, and she got wetter every time she thought of what they'd do later.

The uniform would have to go to the drycleaners after tonight.

Sal sat back on the sofa and tapped his chin. "I wonder. Do you think this guy knows you?"

Nick sat up straight. "What are you talking about?"

"The perp. The kidnapper. The case. Do you think he knows you?" Sal suggested again.

Nick narrowed his gaze menacingly. "Why would you ask?"

Sal shrugged. "He seems pissed at you, vengeful, like he's getting even with you or something. It seems like a grudge act. He calls you every time he goes after a hit, and he tries to kill you, too. He's not just trying to kill the victims. He wants *you* dead."

Nick's back snapped into place, stiff as a board. "I figure he wants me out of the way so he can get to Jeni. This Jeni." He pointed at her. "And the other one. I'm in the way."

John put in, "I think Sal's right. Who've you ticked off?"

Nick huffed. "Lots of people, but how does that tie into *Carpathia* and the fact the kidnapper took people from that dance club, and the fact the owner's named Jeni?"

John shrugged. "I don't know, but it's odd. Even if he wasn't after you in the beginning, he's decided to go at you with a vengeance now, from what you've told us."

Nick shook his head. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

Jeni nudged him with her elbow. "We'll have to log some more info into that computer database of yours and do some thinking on it." She grinned. "Maybe even go for pizza and toss around some ideas again."

Nick smiled suddenly. "Yeah, we both know how that night ended."

Jeni's face flamed volcano hot, but John nodded in agreement to Jeni's idea and said, "Okay, so let's go."

Nick whipped his head around. "Let's go where?"

John grinned like a fool. "To the pizza place, with the computer. We can *all* toss around some ideas."

"No. I can do that myself, and Jeni can..."

Sal headed for the door. "We've got the van. Might as well use it."

Nick looked at Jeni. She leaned in. "It's okay. What I have planned for you will keep."

"My hard-on won't go away, but damn, I want you now."

Jeni kissed him quick on the lips, and they all chuckled. John declared, "Yep, they've got it bad."

"And you're not helping me out here, ya jerks."

Sal feigned innocence. "Of course we are. We said we'd help with the case."

"I'm not talking about the case, and you damn well know it."

Sal acted offended. "But don't you care about the case?" Nick squinted at him. "You know I do."

John patted him on the back with a loud brotherly smack that jolted Nick forward. "Then let's go. Surely we can come up with some theory."

"But will it be a good one?"

Sal chuckled. "I sure hope so."

Two hours later, they headed home, and Nick's family finally left them in peace. They'd entered quite a bit of evidence and several summations, but nothing concrete. How could they? There was nothing solid to go on. The perp never left a trace of forensic evidence or anything else substantial, according to Nick, and John the fireman, who'd logged what the fire investigation team had told him. At one point, Nick wondered aloud if the guilty party could be a cop, which could mean John and Sal were right. Maybe the guy knew Nick and harbored a grudge toward him. Jeni shivered. Nick could be in more danger than her, probably was, from what she'd seen. The guy hadn't asked Jeni to come to those places alone and help the kidnap victims. He'd asked for Nick, and that meant Nick was the target, at least one of the targets, even if he hadn't been tagged as one at the start. He was now, and that worried Jeni, more than anything. It even overrode the fear of danger to herself.

Nick couldn't die. And that was that.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Twenty One

Nick closed the door behind the last of his family members and reached for Jeni, just as the phone rang. He threw up his hands in frustration. "You've got to be kidding."

The voice slithered into his ear. "Nick, baby, I'm waiting for you, and so is Sheila. The docks. In Lake St. Louis. Pier nineteen. She'll be waiting, holding on for dear life. I think she's cold, Nick. Maybe even has hypothermia already. Certainly she'll drown, unless you can stop *her* from dying before *you* do." The voice lowered an octave, and Nick's skin crawled. He picked up on the hatred in the evil voice, even with the cloaking device protecting the sick bastard's identity. "And leave the bitch-in-heat at home."

The angry dial tone sounded in Nick's ear before he had a chance to respond. He hit the end button and turned to Jeni. "This time, there'll be no argument. You'll stay here." He called his captain. "Send another patrol over here. I want two men out front, two in back and one inside, a female officer." He kissed Jeni and turned to go, and then turned back. "No one gets in but the police. You hear me?"

Jeni nodded, her face paper white, her lips thin and pale. Nick left, before he decided saving another woman's life instead of staying here with Jeni—wasn't the best idea.

Nick had never considered himself an idiot, but he'd nearly gotten himself killed twice now, so he used his brain this time. The perp almost blew him up in a tunnel and just about blew him away at Amy's house. This time, the culprit wouldn't get the chance to take a pot shot at him and smear him like a stain onto the pier, nor would the jerk turn Nick into ash. This time, Nick would win, easily. He hadn't taken all those swimming, scuba diving and survival lessons for nothing, and he hadn't brought along his high-powered, night-vision, police-issued goggles for nothing, either.

He eyed pier nineteen through the glasses, turning the lens to focus on the woman bobbing in the water, her hands clinging to the rail, her arms looking as if she had only seconds before their strength gave out, her face barely out of the water, her lips spitting out mouthfuls every few seconds as the waves lapped at the water and tossed it into her face mockingly.

Nick spat out the driver's side window. The prick must've tied something to her legs. The woman would let go soon. She'd have no choice. Her hands would slip from the rail above her, her lifeline, and she'd sink to the bottom, unable to swim to the shore with the weights attached to her feet and pulling her down into her cold, watery tomb.

Nick exited his car and tugged on the scuba suit and oxygen tanks. He dove into the lake a good quarter mile from pier nineteen. He'd swam longer distances many times, especially over the past year when memories haunted him and guilt drove him to rid his mind and body of excess energy and mangled nerves.

Now he used that earned stamina and strength to jet through the cool water and head for the drowning woman, or soon to be drowning if he missed his mark, or got there too late. He set her in his sights and dove under the dark surface, lit only by moonlight and a few dim lights along the water's edge.

He had little time, but he made good use of it. Within minutes, he reached the woman, cut the bag of rocks from her feet, and yanked her under. Her eyes registered shock, but she must've figured he was there to help. She didn't struggle, and she'd obviously sucked in much needed air before being submerged. She blinked, and recognition was evident in her gape. She hugged him, in the murky depths, although the water wasn't so murky Nick couldn't see her grateful expression.

He removed the oxygen hose from his mouth and put it to hers. She drew air into her desperate lungs and nodded her thanks. He placed it back on his mouth and began to swim, his hand in hers. She was a good swimmer, thankfully, but she'd have been no match for the burlap bag of rocks weighing her down, and she would've been a better swimmer if she hadn't been clinging to a rail for so long she'd become exhausted. It surprised him she did her part, kicking and using her free arm to propel herself through the water, aiding her own rescue.

Nick stopped every few feet to allow her to suck in air from the tank, and continued in the direction he'd come from. The kidnapper had likely assumed she'd dropped to her watery grave on her own, too tired to hang on to the rail any longer. At least, Nick hoped the perp thought so, and had gone away, leaving him and Sheila to swim to safety where he'd entered the water at the shore. Tired and breathing heavy, Nick and Sheila trudged from the lake and collapsed for a few minutes on the beach. After only a few minutes, Nick lost patience. He wanted to go home. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, breathing like she'd never get enough air again. He took her to the hospital and posted a guard outside her door. He returned to Jeni, and thanked God he'd survived another test of wills against the idiot attempting to shorten his life, and the lives of several others. He hoped *he* could shorten the *son of a bitch's* life, soon. He had no use for the bastard. Not anymore. He wanted this over and done with. Period.

Jeni wrapped her arms around his neck and held on for dear life, showering him with warm kisses, then snuggling with him when he crawled into bed beside her, still a little cold and shivering from his time in the water. She spooned him, instead of allowing him to spoon her, as he'd done so many times before, holding her protectively, possessively. He liked it, the way the tables had turned. He enjoyed her coddling. No matter how manly it made him *not* seem.

The next morning came too soon. Nick hit the snooze alarm about ten times and refused to budge when the clock read thirty minutes past his usual heading out for work time.

The phone rang, forcing him to deal with reality.

When his captain told him the news, he hopped out of bed and made a beeline for the shower. "Get dressed. We're going to *Carpathia*. The owners finally showed up."

Within half hour they pulled to a screeching halt in front of the club, and the owner of the hottest dance club in town let Nick and Jeni into her office. "Could you tell me what's going on, Officer? My manager is a bit freaked out by your threats, and I'm worried, too. I don't need some scandal messing with my income and the rep of my club."

"Nice of you to be worried about the women being hurt by some asshole holding a grudge against you." Nick's body couldn't be more rigid. Jeni thought his spine mine break right in two.

The owner sighed. "Yeah, I'm sorry about those girls, but this isn't my fault. I'll put more security in the parking lot, though." She shook her head. "It's a damn shame people can't be decent and let each other live their lives and have a good time, without living with the fear of being killed in a parking lot."

Nick nodded. "Whoever is doing this, he's leaving *your* name plastered all over the sidewalks near the houses he burns to the ground. At first we thought it was *this* woman's name, because her name is Jeni, too, and she was kidnapped outside your club." Nick indicated Jeni standing at his side. He narrowed his eyes. "So, who've you pissed off enough he wants to get back at you by kidnapping innocent people from your club?"

"What are you talking about? I don't have any enemies. I just have lots of friends and associates. I'm a peaceful, funloving night club owner. Who would hate me enough to do this? I'm not even competition to anyone. Not around here. The clubs in this town are spread out enough no single owner feels as if his or her pockets are being shorted." Nick leaned in and placed his palms on her desk. She reared back and gasped, but Nick didn't budge. "Someone attempted to murder several women he nabbed from your parking lot, or nearby, so think. Who doesn't like you?"

She shook her head, wide eyed. "But this can't have anything to do with me. Seriously. It can't. I-I don't have any enemies. Really."

"Someone hates you. *Think*. Have you had an argument recently with anyone at all?" Nick's patience no longer existed.

The owner's brows drew together. "Well, there was this thin, butchy-looking woman, but that was just weird. She kept coming in here, always asking to talk to me personally. When she started touching me, in strange ways, intimatelike, woman to woman, I backed off and stopped talking to her. I refused to speak with her when she inquired about me and asked to see me. *Humph*. If looks could kill, I'd surely be dead. She told my manager to tell me I'd be sorry for ignoring her, and then she left in a huff. I haven't seen her since." Jeni-the-owner shook her head. "Man, she wore some heavy perfume. It blasted me every time I got close to her. Weirdest lesbian experience I ever had. Actually, only one I ever had."

Jeni gasped, and the sound drew Nick's attention. "What is it?"

"Martinelli. That's it. It's not a man. A woman kidnapped me. Martinelli. Her perfume. That's why it's always so distracting when I smell it. I must've gotten a whiff of it right before she hit me with ... her nightstick. That's it. That was the sound I heard. It had to be. The scrape I remembered hearing. It was the sound of her nightstick being pulled from its case."

Nick gave a vigorous shake of his head. "No way. She's my partner."

Jeni edged closer to him. "Still. It makes sense. Doesn't it?"

Nick rubbed his temple and looked at the club owner. "Thank you, Ma'am. We might be back, but we're gonna work this angle for a while. See what we can dig up by way of evidence."

Jeni touched his arm. "And you can at least talk to Martinelli. See what she says and how she reacts."

Nick took Jeni's arm and started to leave. Martinelli stood in the open doorway, legs apart, gun drawn.

"What's up, Martinelli?" Nick sounded only slightly calmer than he felt.

"Shut up, Nick. I was outside the door the whole time. I heard everything you said. You're all about to die, and all this will be pinned on Jeni here, the owner, not the slut you're screwing." Martinelli's eyes sparked with fury and hatred. She glared at Jeni with an icy stare that could practically drill a whole through a normal person. Jeni simply gave Martinelli a glare of her own.

Nick's gut tightened with fear. He'd lost Isabella. He wasn't about to lose Jeni, too. *No.* She wouldn't die right here in front of him. *Think. Find a way out of this.* Martinelli continued, snarling at him, "By the way, Nick, if you'd stayed away from that skanky fiancée of yours, she wouldn't have died, either."

The words stung Nick like a whip. His head jerked back as if he'd received a blow. He slung the words at Vick, completely enraged, "What the hell are you saying?"

"There was no gang, Nick. I can't believe you fell for that lame excuse for a staged crime. I expected you dive right in and find someone guilty of Isabella's murder, but you would've found evidence of someone else doing it, not me. I'd set someone else for that fall, too, like I did this time, but you didn't even bother. You withered up and faded away, until this little event brought you out of hibernation. Not that you haven't been busy. You refused to work Isabella's case, or date other women, though, and that's the problem. I wanted you for myself. I pulled Isabella over, flashing my lights, and I got out, blew her brains out, and set fire to her car. Up in smoke." Martinelli snapped her fingers and grinned wickedly. "Just like that."

Nick reeled. His head spun, and he teetered on the verge of vomiting. The morbid, gruesome picture Martinelli painted of what'd happened to Isabella sucker punched him in the abdomen and made his gut heave. He'd kill Vick for this.

"Why?" he requested in a hoarse whisper. "Why Isabella? She never did anything to hurt anyone in her whole life. Neither have any of these other victims. You're a cop. Why would you do this?"

"I thought if she was out of the picture, you'd fall for me. By the way, I'm not a lesbian, like Jeni here says, I'm bi. I'd have been more than happy to wait until you were over Isabella, you fool." Martinelli shoved a thumb in the club owner's direction. "Then I started hanging out at *Carpathia* and checking out Jeni here. Fresh meat. I came here to drink, and I saw her. What I saw, I liked, and I thought she was interested. She led me on, and she knows it. *Tease.* Now she's going to pay. Dearly."

Martinelli waved her gun back and forth like a loose cannon. She'd about lost control, of both her gun and her mind. So had Nick. Vick might snap soon and shoot one of them, either accidentally or on purpose.

Martinelli added with venom, "As if that wasn't enough, now you've found another whore. I know you're pumping her, staying in that house of hers, protecting her. *Fine.* If I can't have you, either of you, then no one will. You're all goners. Who wants to go first?"

Nick could barely breathe, much less answer her. Then a movement caught his vision out of the corner of his eye. A janitor struck out from behind, whacking Martinelli over the head with a broom handle and knocking her to the floor. Nick had the opening he needed, and he took advantage of it. He jumped on Martinelli and placed her arms behind her back. He locked them together with his cuffs as she kicked and screamed wildly.

"Thank you for admitting to everything you've done in front of all these credible witnesses, Vick, *partner*, and wrapping this all up so nice and tidy for me. To think I thought I'd never get closure for Isabella's death, that I'd never know who killed her and be able to put the son of a bitch behind bars. Little did I know, the culprit wasn't a son of a bitch at all, but a *bitch*, instead. You'll fry, Martinelli, if I have anything to say about it, and I'll be there to see it." Nick spoke the promise slowly and deliberately, and a calm settled over him. He'd finally found peace, and hope, and love, again.

Nick spent the rest of the day getting a search warrant, going through Martinelli's car, house and locker at the precinct, and gathering enough evidence to convict her without question.

Nick discovered her journal tucked away under her pillow and read a few entries. She needed mental help, but she deserved whatever punishment she got, too. He also uncovered rolls of duct tape and extra cans of gasoline in the trunk of her police cruiser. She'd draped a blanket over them, the kind of blanket used when victims were dragged out of car crashes or injured in some other way. How ironic. She'd used something good for such an ugly purpose, and she'd actually used her police car to kidnap her victims. She'd driven the same car to burn down their homes, which was why she'd always been in the area and the first on the scene, Nick realized.

The case was wrapped up and sealed up tight. Isabella had been avenged. Now what would he do about Jeni, and keeping her for the rest of his life? And would she let him?

[Back to Table of Contents]

Twenty Two

Jeni had the jitters. Nick had said he'd stop by her house after he finished at the precinct. She assumed he wanted to let her in on the facts of the case, but she already knew the most important part: who'd done it, and why.

Nick would go back to his own life now. How would she go on? She wanted to keep him, very much so. She needed him, to be complete, to be truly happy.

She hadn't known his fiancée had been murdered, or the circumstances surrounding her death, but now she understood why he'd gotten that look of horror on his face each time *Carpathia* was mentioned. Jeni felt guilty. She was jealous of the memory of a dead woman. How could anyone compete with and come to terms with that?

By the time Nick pulled into Jeni's driveway, a drowning sense of gloom and loneliness had settled over her. She wished she'd called him and told him to mail her a written copy of the police report. Nick would want to get on with his own life, away from her. She might as well let him do that. Immediately. Why make a fool of herself and draw out his exit from her life?

When he knocked on the door, she inhaled deeply and opened the door with a smile plastered on her face. She needed to get the farewells over with and send him on his way. "Thanks for stopping by, Nick, and for all you've done for me, for all the women you saved. I don't need to know any details, so ... well ... goodbye." She started to back away and close the door. Nick stopped her with a hand on her arm. "You've forgotten something. I left my overnight bag inside." He smiled at her.

"Can I have it back?"

"Oh. Yes. I'm sorry. Please, come in." Jeni felt more out of control and on edge than she ever had. Nick stepped inside and closed the door. Jeni looked at him, confused. Why didn't he didn't grab his overnight bag and bolt? Didn't he want to go? He'd never given her any indication he wanted a future with her. Jeni's body tingled as memories of heated moments came back to her mind's eye with a flash. She couldn't stand his nearness a minute longer. Tears stung the backs of her eyelids. She told herself to get this over with. "Your bag. Where is it? I'll get it."

Nick reached out and put both his hands on the sides of her face. "It's not going to be that easy, for either of us, to walk away." He kissed her softly, at first. She opened her mouth and invited him in, welcomed him, and he entered her mouth with his hot tongue. A throaty purr escaped her, and his mouth possessed hers completely. The kiss turned rough, needy, desperate and passionate. She arched into him, and his hardness rubbed against her lower body. Nick wanted her physically, she knew, and, if that was all she could have of him, even if for only this one last time, she'd take what she could get.

She put her hands around his neck and moved against him. A sound of desperation rippled from deep within him, but he continued to kiss her and removed her clothing, a piece at a time, backing her up, leaning her up against the wall. When he had her totally naked, he took first one breast with his hand, then with his mouth, then the other breast, loving them gently but firmly and thoroughly. Jeni had never known such exquisite sensation was possible, never even dreamed of it, until she'd met Nick, and he'd taught her unlimited bliss of lovemaking. She wanted more of him, now. She reached for his zipper, but he stopped her hand. Nick gazed at her as if she were the most precious jewel in the world. "This is for you first, me, later."

Jeni was in real trouble. She'd lost her heart to this man, and in less time than she'd thought possible. Nick worked his way down her body, kissing her, licking and sucking her breasts, sliding his tongue over her sensitized pressure points and quivering body parts, her stomach, her thighs, behind her knees. Then he moved back up her torso, craving his talented touch.

He braced her against the wall with his left hand on her hip and draped her right leg over his shoulder. Inserting two fingers into her core to pleasure her from the inside, he used his tongue to pleasure her on the outside. She lost all strength in her wobbly legs. A wave of intense pleasure started where Nick worked his magic with his tantalizing tongue and knowing fingers. The climax moved throughout her whole body, washing over her like a tidal wave of stunning glory. She couldn't think, only feel, utterly overwhelmed, breathless. She grabbed the wall to brace herself with one hand, leaning back and arching into him, moving with him. Grabbing his hair with the other hand, she rode the tidal wave to the ocean's end. * * * *

When Jeni sighed with completion, Nick stood up and scooped her up in his arms. He took her to the bedroom, to finish what he'd started, loving her. He gently placed her on the edge of the bed and stood in front of her, still fully clothed. She undressed him, watching him intently. It was almost more than he could stand. He had to force himself not to grab her by the arms and scream out his love for her. He wanted to brand her, mark her, make her his, but he didn't want to scare her away.

When his clothing was removed and pooled on the floor at his feet, she reached for him. Still sitting on the bed in front of him, Jeni put one hand on his backside and the other on his throbbing shaft. He gasped in shock and sucked in a sharp breath, making a hissing sound between clenched teeth when she touched her tongue to the tip of him and rolled her moist lips around the head of his manhood, covering the end of him with her wonderful mouth. He jerked violently, involuntarily, and took her wrist in one hand and her head in the other, unable to stand the extreme sensations of intense pleasure racing through him and robbing him of his breath.

She protested with an incomprehensible but audible and unmistakable objection. He ignored her and pulled her onto the bed with him. Lying her down with his front to her back, he raised her leg to gain access to her center. Putting one arm under her head, he linked his fingers with hers. Using the fingers of his other hand to gently massage her swollen folds at her center, he drew moisture from within her wetness, moving his fingers in and out of her, then massaging her sensitive nub.

Encouraged at how ready and panting she was for him, he removed his fingers from within her and replaced them with the tip of his shaft from behind. He continued to use his fingers to pleasure her on the outside. Moving the tip of his manhood in and out of her from behind, he wasn't sure how long he could take this type of tormenting foreplay without needing more.

Jeni arched her body backward, giving him better access. He sank deeper, and his breathing became heavy and haggard. He entered her more fully. She came again then, and when she came down from the wave that'd hit her, he withdrew from her carefully. She turned toward him and rolled him over onto his back, her hands on his shoulders. Straddling him, she lifted herself above him. She slid down onto his manhood and began to arch toward him, throwing her head back and moving up and down his full length.

Nick lost control immediately, giving himself up to her. He placed both hands at her waist to steady her and just to be able to touch her. Jeni's internal muscles clenched around his pulsating shaft. They came at the same time, almost too quickly as far as Nick was concerned. He'd wanted to make this last, for both of them.

As they rode the same wave of pleasure, peaking together, Jeni called out his name and dropped her body like a limp rag doll onto his chest. Her head lay in the curve of his neck, and her naked breasts rested on Nick's heart. Moments later, Nick's breathing slowed and became even, as did Jeni's. He fell asleep that way, still inside her, happily exhausted and satisfied beyond reason, his arms wrapped around her tightly, possessively, protectively.

When Nick awoke, it was dark. Jeni remained asleep on top of him. As if she sensed his eyes on her, she opened her lids and started to rise and move to the side. Nick refused to release his grip on her body.

"I've fallen in love with you, Jeni. *Ti amo*." Jeni froze in his arms. Nick hesitated, hoping, waiting. When she said nothing, he added, "I know it's too soon, but, can't we try to make something work? I know you're busy, and you have future plans that don't include me or any other man, but..."

Jeni stopped him, raising up on one arm, placing a fingertip on his lips, looking him straight in the eye. "I'm in love with you, too, Nick. I just didn't know how to tell you. My plans don't matter anymore. Not if I can't share them with you. I can change my mind, can't I? I'm a woman, after all. So, it's my prerogative."

She gave him a sultry smile and a sexy wink. Nick loved that about her, her ability to smile so quickly and take everything in stride. "Then we should get married right away, figure things out as we go, and make our own new plans, together."

"Okay, but we're not celebrating at *Carpathia*." Jeni gave him a sideways grin.

"No, we're not, but we can start right here, right now, with this," Nick drawled and took her mouth with his. Jeni moved

Consequences by Rebecca Savage

over him. Nick smiled and went right on kissing her. *Ride 'em, cowgirl. Ride.*

[Back to Table of Contents]

Epilogue

Six years later:

Jeni walked across the stage at Wash-U and raised her diploma high above her head, waving it madly. She smiled at Nick and their five-year-old daughter, Brianna. She'd gotten pregnant, probably the first time they'd made love. Things had moved at a slower pace after that with her doctoral studies. It was just the way she wanted it.

Nick's brother Sal, his wife Lori, and their son Tristin, as well as his brother John, Sherri and their daughter Jessica, were there, at her graduation, cheering her on. The men whistled shrilly and hooted and hollered like wild cowboys on the range. *So much for professionalism and academia*. Quiet wasn't in this family's repertoire or vocabulary.

Nick's parents, Giovanni and Maria, had accepted and loved Jeni as if she were their own daughter, from the moment Nick had introduced her to them. She couldn't have been happier, unless her own parents could've been alive for her graduation ceremony.

The Tarentinos gathered for a graduation celebration and barbeque at Nick and Jeni's new house, built shortly after they'd married. They needed more space than either one of their small houses afforded. With Brianna on the way, their previous homes had been too cramped for their growing family, and this type of shindig with all the trimmings and extended Tarentino clan. Nick caught Jeni by the waist with one hand and pulled her to him. He held her, pride in his gorgeous eyes.

"Congratulations."

Jeni stared at his eyes, then lowered her gaze to his tempting lips. The heat between them hadn't subsided in all their years together. She giggled and asked, "What for?"

Nick kissed her, then tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm so proud of you, how hard you've worked for this degree and everything you've done and all that you are."

Jeni waved at the air between them and said flippantly, "Oh, I thought you might've been congratulating me for something else. Then again, maybe I should just congratulate you, instead." She laughed at his confused expression and took his hand and placed his hand on her stomach. She whispered against his warm lips, "You're going to be a daddy again."

Nick was momentarily speechless. Then he picked her up and swung her around. He set her down and kissed her, until they were both breathless. Then he took her by the hand and dragged her outside. "Let's go tell the rest of his family the good news."

Any sense of irony and guilt had long since left Jeni's mind. She no longer felt anxiety about the future, only hope and happiness. She and Nick planned their time together and dreamed of making their own future bright, and their wishes come true.

The consequences of one sick woman's actions hadn't destroyed them. They'd brought Jeni and Nick together and

made them stronger, and happier, and they ended their sadness.

Sometimes, consequences were a good thing.

Jeni smiled as Nick held his wide hand over her still flat stomach and led her to their backyard where their family awaited them.

A very good thing indeed. [Back to Table of Contents] Consequences by Rebecca Savage

About Rebecca

Rebecca Savage grew up in a small town, population 1470. She joined the USAF just after high school graduation and copied Morse Code Top Secret SCI clearance messages for ten years. It was all up hill from there.

She received an honorable discharge and went back to college and earned her Masters in History. She now lives in Missouri and teaches history to middle school, high school and college kids.

She writes contemporary romantic suspense because she loves to read and write and keep people on their toes. She hopes you enjoy her work.

Visit our website for our growing catalogue of quality books.

www.champagnebooks.com