

# **Danger in Paradise**

The background of the cover is a vibrant sunset over the ocean. The sky transitions from a deep purple at the top to a bright orange and red near the horizon. Silhouettes of palm trees are visible on both the left and right sides. In the lower center, a man and a woman are silhouetted against the bright part of the sunset, appearing to be dancing or embracing on a beach. The overall mood is romantic and tropical.

**Elizabeth Anderson**

© 2020 by Elizabeth Severn. All rights reserved

This is a work of fiction. Any characters or names, other than historical figures and their place in the novel, are purely from the imagination of the author.

## ONE

Following the hostess to her table, Jessica Nelson glanced around the dimly lit restaurant to see if her fiancé had arrived yet. But she didn't see him anywhere. The hostess, wearing a long, brightly flowered muumuu, stopped at an empty table for two and placed a menu on the napkin. Thanking her politely, Jessie pulled out her own chair.

Another waitress arrived almost the second Jessie sank onto the chair and asked, "Could I get you a drink, ma'am?"

Jessie gazed up at the blonde who wore a short wrap-around, flowered skirt and matching halter. With a tired smile, she answered, "I'll just have a diet cola, thank you."

As the waitress left, Jessie leaned wearily against the chair. What a week! Two hours of overtime that day and three the other four days—with no end in sight. She would have to put in weekends and long days until she solved the problem. And there was no telling when that would be.

At least, her appetite hadn't diminished with the increased workload, as it often did. She was famished! If Todd weren't late again, she could order and quiet her growling stomach. Todd was always late—to nearly every appointment they had—because he liked to make an entrance. Despite her own compulsion to be early, she bore his tardiness silently. It was part of Todd Hardy's state senatorial game plan to be fashionably late.

But that night she was in no mood for his delaying tactics. She'd had a busy day, and she was exhausted. All she wanted to do was eat and go home to bed. She needed to if she wanted enough energy for the long, busy weekend.

A man startled her from her thoughts and explained that Todd had to cancel their date. He had even notified her late! Although furious, she was glad that she could order her meal.

\*\*\*

"Did you see the paper today, Nick?" the bartender asked.

Nicholas Ramsdale absently toyed with the straw in his whiskey and water. Besides being the bartender, Steve was his brother—and definitely looked it with the dark brown hair and bright green eyes. Sighing, Nick ran his fingers through his own thick hair. The past few years had streaked his own dark hair gray at the temples.

“Which paper?” he asked to pacify his brother.

Steve dropped the society section on the bar. “Probably *any* Hawaiian paper.”

Glancing at the heading, Nick released a disgruntled groan then took a sip of his drink. “Great. I’ve been in a fifteen-month slump, and you’re showing me the engagements. That’s just what I need.”

“Senator Todd Hardy’s getting married.”

“I heard something about that in my research, but I didn’t think it was important enough to follow up on. If this news was supposed to cheer me up, it didn’t work. Or do you think I’ll get the information I need from his fiancée? If you do, I doubt he told her anything.”

“Just read the article.”

Moving the newspaper to a better light, Nick ran his hand through the mass of curls on his head and scanned the story.

*At a news conference today, controversial state senator Todd Hardy announced his engagement to Jessica Nelson, the widow of the late shipping tycoon, Joseph Nelson.*

Nick stared at his brother. His heart thumped in excitement. “Jessie’s back!”

“I thought that would get your attention,” Steve said with a grin.

“Attention, hell. It gets my blood flowing again. I wonder why she hasn’t called me.”

“Maybe she’s been busy taking care of Joe’s business.”

“Naw, she sold out about a year after he died, remember? She took off for the mainland at the same time—couldn’t stand the memories.”

“Sounds like she’s over them now.”

“Yeah,” Nick agreed.

Steve studied his brother. “Why are you so down? You two got along great. You had all kinds of fun together. I never had so much fun as I did when you guys took me places.”

“That was eleven years and three *huge* mistakes ago.”

“They can’t be that big.”

Nick glared at his brother. He always hated saying these things, but he had to explain if he wanted Steve to shut up. “I introduced her to my best friend, didn’t I? And the next thing I knew I was best man at their wedding. That’s not a huge mistake?”

“You stayed friends.”

“Until I made my next mistake and got married. Cathy hated Jess, you know. We didn’t get to see each other much after that, until Joe got sick.”

“You were the best friend they had, Nick,” Steve reminded him. “You stood by Jessie at the end, and you stayed by her even though Cathy was furious about it. You supported Jessie when she needed you most.”

“And that led to the last big mistake. I’ll never get over that one—even if Jessie did tell me that she understood and didn’t hold it against me. Of course, one good thing came out of that mistake. I finally got up the courage to ditch Cathy.”

“So, what was your last mistake?”

“Let’s just say that the last time we were together, we didn’t exactly get along. I tried to talk her out of selling her business, but she wouldn’t listen. She said she just didn’t want it. She wanted to tie the proceeds up in bonds and live a simple life on whatever she could make on her job.”

“Hey, Steve,” a woman said as she walked to the bar beside Nick. “Got a couple orders for you. A carafe of Bordeaux, two glasses, and a Diet Coke.”

When Steve turned to fill the orders, the waitress leaned against the bar rail. Turning her gaze to Nick, she asked, “How’s the new book coming?”

“Slowly.” Finishing his drink, Nick set down his glass and stood up. “I’d better go. I have some notes to go through. See you later, Steve—Peggy.”

Picking up the newspaper, Nick strode away from the bar. In his car, he pulled out his smart phone and googled *Jessica R. Nelson* and the ZIP Code. There she was. First on the list. It gave her previous addresses and phone numbers. Taking the pen he kept in the console of his vehicle, he wrote her number on his hand. Then he punched in the numbers. Three rings later the phone stopped ringing. It was the first time he’d heard her voice in six years.

“Hello, this is Jessie. We aren’t free at the moment. If you’ll leave your name and number at the sound of the tone, one of us will call you as soon as possible.”

Nick released a sad chuckle and hung up. It was just like Jessie to cover up the fact that she lived alone. When he’d dated Jessie Porter, she’d been an eighteen-year-old virgin who wanted to stay that way until her wedding night. He’d been so sure they would eventually marry that he’d only broached the subject of sex once during the year they’d dated. Then he’d taken her to Joe’s birthday party at the mansion and had lost her within two months.

Maybe it was a good thing that she wasn’t home. Why go through rejection and pain a second time? He could just pretend he that hadn’t phoned her. In his heart, though, he knew he had to contact her sooner or later. And the sooner he did it, the better off she would be.

Jessie needed to know the truth about Todd Hardy, or what he suspected was the truth. He owed it to her—and to Joe, because he’d promised his friend to take care of Jessie. And she needed that now more than ever.

\*\*\*

For the fifth time that evening, Jessie picked up her cell phone and stared at Nick’s number. She’d followed his Facebook author’s page ever since she’d left town, but she’d never friended him. She’d needed a clean break from him back then, and had insisted that they not communicate. But she hadn’t been able to erase him from her mind. That was why she’d found him on the social website, just so she could see his face every day. And she’d kept his home phone number on her cell in case of an emergency.

Now, though, she *needed* to get in touch with him. So, why was it that every time she tried to call Nick, she couldn’t? They’d been such good friends—until Cathy came along. She didn’t like Nick’s wife any better than Cathy liked her. Still, she missed the closeness she’d shared with him. As badly as she wanted to talk to him, she couldn’t. She dreaded the possibility of Cathy answering.

Jessie wandered to the balcony terrace of her condominium. After seeing that day’s paper, she really needed to talk to Nick. He’d always believed in standing behind promises, and he would be furious with her for breaking hers to let him know if she returned to Hawaii. Now she would have to explain why she hadn’t contacted him during the fifteen months she’d been in town. Maybe she should call Steve. He would know if Nick had seen the article.

Returning to the living room, she opened her telephone directory and thumbed through it as she sank onto the chair. After locating Steve’s name, she picked up the handset and punched the proper number. The phone had only rung four times when there was a knock on her door. Stunned, she hung up slowly and went to answer it. Who could be visiting at

10:30 p.m.?

Releasing the bolt, she pulled the door open and found a tall, brown-haired man with his back to the door. As he turned toward her, she stared up at him, her mouth gaping in shock. “Nick!”

His jaw dropped, and he studied her silently for several seconds. Jessie knew she’d changed a lot since she’d last seen him, and she knew just as well that he couldn’t believe the difference. Then she remembered what she was wearing—nothing more than a long, royal blue negligee with black lace trim and spaghetti straps, which clung to her alluringly.

“You’ve aged beautifully, Jessie,” he breathed.

“And you haven’t changed a bit,” she said with a mischievous grin, “except for a few gray hairs among the brown.”

“I see you’re ready for bed. Maybe I should come back another time.”

“Don’t be silly.” Grabbing his wrist, she pulled him into her condo then closed the door and locked it. “I’ve been thinking about you all night. In fact, I was calling Steve when you knocked. Apparently, he was out.”

“He works nights.”

Suddenly nervous, Jessie wandered to her fireplace. Nick had seen the article. It was the only way he could have known that she was in Hawaii.

“I really don’t know what to say, Nick,” she began.

“Neither do I, but I do know what to do.” She started when he tenderly grasped her shoulders, turned her toward him, and gazed into her eyes. Then he said, “If I don’t get this out of my system, I won’t be able to concentrate on the conversation.”

Before she could protest, he slid his fingers into her curly auburn hair and drew her closer. When his lips captured hers tenderly, all thought of protest vanished from her mind. She felt like the past years hadn’t even existed. They had, though, and she and Nick had some very important topics to discuss. Unfortunately, she couldn’t break the kiss. Her body wouldn’t allow it.

Without warning, he released her and broke away, saying, “Man, Jess, I’m sorry. I didn’t even think. Is he here?”

“Is who here?”

“The future Mr. Nelson.”

“Todd’s in Maui—probably visiting his parents, although he didn’t say so. He doesn’t live here, anyway.” Again, she grinned impishly. “You know me. I don’t believe in premarital sex.” Sitting down on the couch with her feet drawn up beside her, Jessie patted the cushion next to hers. “I never really understood something, but I was afraid to ask. Why did you stay around so long when you knew that I wouldn’t give in?”

“I had lots of hope,” he returned as he plopped down beside her.

“Well, I really appreciated it. You were a kind man—and the best friend I’ve ever had.”

“I was a damned fool,” he corrected irritably. “Besides, if I was your best friend, why did you marry Joe when you’d only known him for four months?”

“Because I was blinded by ...”

“Five carats of shine,” he interrupted, his bitterness obvious in his tone.

Jessie bowed her head in shame. As much as it hurt, he was right. She’d admitted it to herself years before, but she’d never told Nick, although she knew she would have to someday. Her shame at having been so mercenary was the only reason she’d sold Joe’s business and moved out of Honolulu.

This conversation was a terrible way to conduct a reunion, but it was better than holding it in and postponing the inevitable. Doing it now would put it in the past tomorrow, then they could get on with their friendship.

“I’m sorry, Jess,” he said, gently stroking her hair. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, you *should* have. I was going to tell you I was blinded by infatuation, but you were right.” Returning her gaze to him, she straightened her shoulders as though she would gather courage in the action. “I was blinded by the money at first—or the infatuation of having it. After a while, though, I really came to love Joe. I just didn’t realize it until he was dying. And I’m still not sure that it wasn’t more of a sisterly love.”

“Like you felt for me,” he inserted.

“That *is* what I said back then, but now I know I was wrong. I don’t think I know what marital love should feel like.”

“What about Hardy? If you’re planning to marry him, you must feel that kind of love.”

“I care about him very much, Nick. He’s kind and sensitive and very intelligent. He doesn’t have nearly as much money as Joe did. And he’s *so* romantic. He does the sweetest things for me.”

“You’re still using the same phrases you used about me.”



Jessie chuckled to disguise her nervousness. "I'm not the author, Nick. You are. But why do you care? You're married to Cathy. That's why I couldn't get up the courage to call you."

With a wide grin, Nick said, "I divorced her about six months after you left."

Jessie stared at him in stunned disbelief. About six months after she'd left? That was about the same time ... No, she couldn't think about that right now. It was too painful.

"After you sold the businesses here and in Lahaina then moved, I told her the truth. I thought she'd head straight to a lawyer, but she forgave me."

"For what? Staying up with me all night? Trying to talk me out of selling?"

Shaking his head, Nick sighed loudly. "Don't delude yourself, Jess. You know more than talking went on. At seven in the morning, I unplugged the house phone and turned off my cell so she wouldn't bother us again. At seven-thirty, ..."

"For Pete's sake, Nick!" she exclaimed, scrambling from the couch. "What did you do? Keep a log of that night?"

"I didn't have to. It's the only one I'll remember for the rest of my life. Thank God, you forgave me."

"Yes. I forgave you," she said, recalling how she'd always considered that such a stupid thing to do. After all, how do you forgive someone for giving you something you wanted deep in your heart? "Then I forgot."

"Did it really mean that little to you?"

Why was she letting him bring up painful memories? If she didn't change the subject, she would divulge information that would hurt them both much worse than avoidance. "I don't want to remember this, Nick. I'm engaged now, so let's find something else to discuss."

"Don't you think we should air this?"

"Nope," she said lightly to keep him from seeing her emotional pain. "I think you should autograph my copy of your first published novel. Come on."

Absently rising, Nick followed Jessie from the living room. Jessie had always lived in denial. She'd denied his feelings when he'd tried to explain them the day she broke off their relationship, so she could date Joe. Less than a year later, she'd denied the same thing when he'd tried to convince her that they could still be friends after he married Cathy. After a two-year separation, he'd raced to her side when Joe got sick. Again, he'd tried to explain his feelings, and again he'd received her denial in return. Yet he'd stayed with her, helping her run

her inherited business for a full year before she'd decided to sell it and move. Even when he'd offered to take over completely so she would stay, she'd denied his feelings.

That had probably been the longest night of his life. Instead of being home sleeping with his wife, he'd spent the entire night trying to talk Jessie into staying. But she had denied him, claiming that he wouldn't have time to write if he took over for her. Worse than that, she had denied his need to have her around. What hurt worst to that very minute, however, was that she denied the most glorious hour and a half of his life.

Jessie stopped and turned toward Nick. How often had she seen that distant expression he got whenever he was deep in thought? As always, she knew what was on his mind—their relationship, more specifically, her denial of it. If only she could ease his mind on that point. But she couldn't.

Nick had always known her better than she knew herself, and he'd never hidden his love for her. To still her sudden distress, she opened her closet before facing him again. "Would you please get the darker strong box out for me? I have trouble moving it."

Nick dragged the strong box from the closet while Jessie went to her purse on the dresser. Dropping to her knees before the small safe, she searched through her keys until she found the right one. As she slid it into the lock, Nick stood behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that he was looking into the safe at the packet of envelopes, several paperback books, and numerous miscellaneous items, all of which he obviously recognized.

Sinking down beside her, he bent one leg in front of him, planting the other foot on the floor to drape his arm over his knee. "I can't believe this, Jessie. These things either I gave you or they pertain to me. I knew you were sentimental, but I didn't expect you to save all of this stuff."

"That's what sentimental people do," she returned with a grin. Withdrawing a tattered copy of his first novel from the box, she held it toward him. "I'll get a pen."

Chuckling, he took one from his shirt pocket then accepted the book. "A writer always has a pen. Anything special you want me to write?"

"How about *To Jess, with loving memories?*"

Nick dropped the book to his lap and opened it to the third page. "Not many people read the dedication page, Jess. I'm surprised you did."

"Sentimental people do things like that all the time."

After scribbling in her book, he returned it to her with a broad smile, but it disappeared when she closed the book. "Aren't you going to read it?"

“Oh! I just assumed you wrote what I suggested.” Opening the book again, she read his inscription:

*This time I won't give up until he slides a wedding band on the same beautiful finger his diamond adorns.*

*Forever your best friend, Nick.*

Jessie closed the book with a heavy sigh. “Nick, ...”

“I know,” he interrupted, laying two fingers over her lips. “You don’t like it. Well, I don’t care anymore. I refuse to stand back and let you make another mistake. I promised Joe that I’d take care of you. If that means protecting you from yourself, that’s exactly what I’ll do. How did you meet Hardy, anyway?”

“Believe it or not, he rear-ended my car at a stop light. I was so shaken that he felt sorry for me and took me to dinner. We’ve been together ever since.”

“And how long is that?”

“Three months.”

“Damn it, Jess,” he said in exasperation. “Won’t you *ever* learn? First, it was Joe and his five-carat diamond. Now it’s Hardy and his—what?—three carats?”

Jessie’s ire rose, and she responded irritably. “Are you calling me a fortune-hunter? If so, you’re wrong, because Todd’s not rich.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, but you are easily blinded by glitz. You even admitted it tonight.”

Grasping his hand tenderly, she smiled to change the mood the conversation had taken. “This is our first meeting in six years, Nick. Let’s not argue. Let’s go through this box and remember all the fun things we’ve done together.”

“You’re right,” he agreed as he began rummaging in the box. “Let’s see what else you’ve kept in here besides books.”

Within minutes they were so involved in their memories that Jessie lost track of time. Seemingly one minute it was nearly eleven and the next it was three-fifteen. She stared at her bedside radio-alarm in amazement when Nick went into the bathroom. She had to get up at six-thirty. That was just a little over three hours away, and she wasn’t even relaxed enough

to fall asleep.

“Do you know what time it is?” she asked when he came back.

He glanced at his watch then returned his gaze to Jessie, questioning her with a wide, mischievous grin. “Way past your bedtime?”

“Absolutely,” she admitted. “I have to work tomorrow.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m an intel spec for the Air Force.”

“You’re a *what?*” he asked.

Nick’s expression gave away his horror at her admission, but she didn’t want to end the evening with what she knew could be a drawn-out argument. To still his obvious distress, she smiled brightly and said, “An intelligence specialist, Nick. I thought a spy novelist would know *governmentese*.”

“I do. I just didn’t think that you, of all people, would be involved with top secret information.”

Jessie giggled. “Surprise, surprise. I’m glad that I finally did something you wouldn’t expect of me.”

But Nick’s reply was far from the cheerful retort she expected. “I don’t like it. Does Hardy know what you do?”

Jessie stared up at him. Come to think of it, Todd had never asked her what she did for a living. She never discussed her work with anybody. In fact, Nick was the only person she’d ever told so much as her job title. She just told anybody else who asked that she was a civil servant at Wheeler Air Force Base.

“He’s never even asked,” she admitted quietly. “Now I really do have to go to bed. Why don’t you use the guest room tonight? The bed’s already made up with clean sheets.”

When she started toward the bathroom, he grabbed her wrist and spun her into his arms. Embracing her tightly, he pressed his lips against hers. Although initially stunned, Jessie enjoyed this kiss more than any of his others. For the first time, she hadn’t expected it. And she was thrilled that he wasn’t always predictable.

The moment his tongue slipped into her mouth to reunite with hers, a jolt shot through her unlike any she’d ever experienced. This was the first time she felt as though nothing else mattered except the man in her arms. No, that wasn’t true. She had felt that before, but only once.

Breaking the kiss, he held her tightly against his long, hard body.

"I didn't expect you to do that," she admitted softly.

"I didn't expect to do it," he returned, "but I had to do something."

"Why?"

"I'm not going to sit back and watch you make another mistake. That's what it would be if you marry Hardy. I was a wimp when I let you marry Joe, but I've changed. I'm going to fight for you this time, Jess, and I'm *going* to win. Since you seem to like whirlwind romances so much, I'll show you a whirlwind like you've never *seen* before."

"How?"

Nick shook his head slowly. "If I told you that, it would take all the fun out of it. Now get to bed. I can't have my favorite lady too tired to even think about work."

Stunned by his proclamation, she stared at the door he closed behind him. Was this really the same man she'd left six years ago? Nick looked the same and talked the same, but his mind had changed drastically. He'd always been open and cheerful. Now he was secretive and serious—more serious than he used to be, anyway. They had laughed a lot, as they always did when they were together. But when the conversation was about their relationship, he stopped joking with her.

\*\*\*

Nick sighed in relief. From the look on Jessie's face, she believed what he'd proclaimed about a whirlwind romance. All he had to do now was figure out how to give her one. Even though he wanted Jessie for himself, the main purpose for his declaration was to protect her from Todd Hardy.

If Jessie hadn't told him what her job was, he wouldn't have been nearly as concerned. And the fact that Hardy had never asked her was very suspicious. It led Nick to only one conclusion: Hardy already *knew* what Jessie did for a living. He also believed the car accident involving Jessie and Hardy had been deliberate—even if he didn't have proof. Until he collected the evidence on those two theories, he had to spend as much time as possible with Jessie so he could protect her. Without proof, she would never believe anyone was as calculating and deceptive as Hardy had been.

At least, she was safe from the senator that night. But how could he convince her to let him sleep over consistently without arousing her suspicions? More importantly, how would

he convince her to give Hardy's ring back? Romance, whirlwind or otherwise, had never been his style.

## TWO

The buzzing alarm dragged Jessie from her dream of Nick. With a groan, she rolled over and pushed the button to turn off the annoyance. When silence reigned in the room, she tossed back the covers and sat up to stretch. The memory of the previous night brought a soft smile to her lips.

Seeing Nick again had been wonderful, but his good night kiss was more than she remembered. There seemed to be a promise in it this time. If she didn't have to work, she would suggest that they spend the day together. Unfortunately, until she found that missing document, she couldn't take time for recreation. She had initialed and logged the report herself, and she felt obligated to find it herself.

As Jessie got ready for work, her mind wandered to the past. For a twenty-eight-year-old man, Nick had been incredibly patient with an eighteen-year-old virgin. But she never understood why. Of all the men she'd dated, Nick had never tried to pressure her into bed. He'd never even suggested it after that one time. Nicholas Ramsdale was indeed a special man.

Then an idea came to her. Todd had left a message on her answering machine that he would be in Maui all weekend. Why not invite Nick to dinner that night? He'd mentioned that he hadn't had time for dating in the last several months, so it was possible that he wasn't busy.

When she was ready to leave her condo, she jotted down a quick note and set it beside the coffee maker. But as she started out the door, she had an overwhelming urge to look in on him.

The bedroom door squeaked as she opened it, and he rolled onto his back with a groan. Almost immediately, she regretted what she'd done. Nick's dream-world arousal was obvious now. To her dismay, the years of celibacy she'd lived through vanished into her years of sexual activity. Without warning, the excitement of lying in a man's arms flooded through her. Closing the door silently, she raced through the living room and out the front door, unintentionally slamming it behind her.

Nick woke with a start, bolting to sit on the bed. That was a door! Someone was after Jessie, just like in his dream! He stealthily searched the apartment and discovered her missing, just as he'd suspected. She'd been kidnapped! He rushed to the kitchen, where he finally saw her note. With a grimace, he unfolded the paper to read it:

*I'll pick up a couple of steaks if you want to come for dinner at 6:30. We'll grill them together just like we used to. Leave me a note, and let me know if you can make it.*

*Forever your best friend,*

*Jessie*

A couple of steaks, she'd written. Apparently, that meant two for dinner. And she'd mentioned grilling together. This was one invitation he refused to decline. Steve and Peggy would just have to understand why he couldn't go to their place for dinner.

Fixing himself some breakfast, Nick tried desperately to think of a way to begin his courtship that evening. But nothing came to mind. By the time he'd showered, it was nine o'clock. Now it wasn't too early to call Steve.

"Hi, Peggy," Nick said to the woman who answered the phone. "Is Steve there?"

"Of course."

Several seconds later Steve came on the phone. "Did you get in touch with Jessie last night?"

"Yeah," Nick explained, "but I couldn't reach her by phone, so I just dropped by. I told her that if she liked whirlwind romances, I'd take her on one. Apparently, it had some effect on her, because she invited me to dinner tonight. Maybe that means Hardy's on his way out. Anyway, we're grilling steaks—like old times. She's getting the meat. Knowing her, she's getting the rest of the food, too."

"That leaves you bringing the wine and flowers, right?"

"Right."

"Wrong, big brother. If you want a whirlwind romance, you have to keep her guessing. You're too damned predictable. That's probably why you lost her twice. Unless you want to find out if bad things really do come in threes, you'd better change your ways."

"I don't know *how* to keep her guessing," Nick admitted. "I'm lousy at that kind of thing."

"Not to worry. Peg and I will help you."

\*\*\*



Jessie hummed a cheerful tune as she arrived at work. Seeing Nick again had a calming effect on her, and she was sure she would find the missing report that day. She glanced at the roster outside the locked door to see if anyone else was there. Her boss was. He was probably busy, so she took her key from the hidden compartment in her wallet and opened the door.

She moved instinctively through her routine and went to her desk in another room. Dropping her purse on it, she put her key away then pushed her wallet back into its designated compartment. Finally, she unlocked her desk with a key on her chain and put her purse in the bottom drawer. Darn! She'd forgotten to sign in.

Humming the entire time, Jessie left the series of rooms and grabbed a pen off the receptionist's desk as she passed. Outside, she signed the register then stared at the closed door with a groan. Where was her mind that morning? She knew the door locked automatically, yet she hadn't blocked it open with her foot for the couple of seconds it took her to sign in. And she'd left her key inside.

Jessie pressed the buzzer outside the secured offices then waited several seconds for Colonel Gary Garver to open the door.

"Ah, so it is you," the tall, slightly overweight officer said with a grin. "I thought I heard you roaming around, but I was in the middle of something. Where's your key?"

"In my purse," she explained as they headed back toward her office, "but I think I left my brain at home. Long nights will do that, you know."

"I thought you going to bed early."

Collapsing into her chair, she examined Gary as he sat on the chair beside her desk. He was dressed in weekend civilian clothes and looked a lot different than usual. For a middle-aged man, he had very little gray in his medium brown hair. Actually, she decided, he was quite attractive in his civvies.

"An old friend dropped by," Jessie said, "and we spent *hours* talking. Nick and I haven't seen each other in six years, so there was a lot to talk about."

"Nick, huh? Does Todd know about him?"

"I've mentioned him a few times, but I never really said much about him. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got work to do. I won't sleep well until I find that report."

"Right. We'll talk at lunch."

No matter how hard Jessie tried to concentrate, she found it impossible. Paging through a file, she woke with a start, not even realizing that she'd fallen asleep. And it happened several times within an hour. Obviously, she wasn't in any condition to work that day. Shuffling into Gary's office, she sank into his secretary's desk chair.

“What a day!” she complained. “I can’t get a thing done. I’m going home before I lose another top secret document.”

“Good idea. And don’t bother coming in tomorrow.”

“We’ll see,” she said noncommittally.

“Drive carefully,” Gary warned with a chuckle. “I don’t want you falling asleep behind the wheel.”

By the time Jessie collapsed across her bed, it was ten o’clock. Inviting Nick to stay had been fun but foolish. That missing report was much more important than reminiscing with an old friend. If she didn’t find it, she could lose her job—and it wasn’t easy to get fired by the government.

When Jessie woke and looked at her alarm, she stared at it in disbelief. It was already after four-thirty, and she hadn’t gone to the grocery store yet. Washing her face to refresh herself, she hurried from her condo with her purse slung over her shoulder.

Why had she said six-thirty? More to the point, why had she taken a night’s worth of sleep instead of a nap? Nick would be right on time, too. If he wasn’t, he would be either five minutes early or five minutes late. How would she ever dust, take a shower, and curl her hair before he arrived? It was already five to five by the clock in her car, and she’d just driven into the supermarket parking lot.

Zippering through the store, she picked up some fresh produce, steaks, milk, eggs, coffee and cereal. Before she left, she returned to the bakery and picked up a double-chocolate cake and some rolls. Finally, she got in the shortest checkout line, only to discover that it was also the slowest. Murphy’s law had struck again!

By the time she got home, it was nearly six. After putting the groceries away, she rushed into the bathroom, pinned up her hair, and took a quick shower. She’d just turned off the water when she heard the doorbell.

Now what? she wondered as she threw on her green satin robe. Hurrying to the door while she tied the sash, she glanced at a clock as she passed it. Six-fifteen. She rushed to open the door, and discovered a man with a grocery bag tucked under one arm and a dozen large, shiny balloons in his free hand.

“Good gravy!” Jessie exclaimed. “A walking balloon factory!”

Pulling the balloons down from before his face, Nick grinned happily. “I’m impressed, Jess. That wasn’t one of your usual clichés. Is that what working for Uncle Sam’s done for you?”

“You’re here before I expected—more than five minutes early.”

He passed her, and she closed the door as he said, “You’re seeing a new me. I brought your flowers.”

Accepting the six brightly flowered balloons he extended toward her, she examined them with a happy smile. “I don’t have a vase they’ll fit in, but thank you. They’re beautiful.”

“I also brought the dark beer.”

“Dark beer?” she repeated in shock. “You never furnished that before. You always brought wine, so I expected ...”

“That’s the point. I wanted to do something you *didn’t* expect. I also wanted to impress you by proving that I remember Lowenbrau Dark is your favorite.”

“Well, you succeeded on both counts. Why don’t you put the beer in the frig while I dress? Then would you be a dear and start the grill? Everything’s by it, except the matches. They’re in the cabinet above the refrigerator—right side.”

“I’d rather help you dress,” he called cheerfully as she headed down the short hall.

“That’s why I’m putting you to work,” she returned with a laugh.

After changing into shorts and a tank top, she joined Nick on the patio, where he was just striking a match. As the charcoal burst into flames, she slid her arms around him from behind, giggling when he started in surprise.

“Geez, woman,” he exclaimed while he turned to embrace her. “I didn’t expect you to do that. I didn’t even think you were here. Next time make some noise.”

She released him with one arm, and they passed through the open sliding patio door. “I didn’t expect to do it. But when I saw you standing there, I felt like eleven years hadn’t gone by.”

“I feel the same way.” Stopping in the living room, he spun her into her arms. With his forearms over her shoulders, he laced his fingers behind her neck and gazed down at her with a grin. “Just think of all the time we wasted because you didn’t call when you got back.”

Unable to resist reveling in her reunion with Nick, she slid her arms around him. “Don’t rub it in. I realize I made a mistake, and I admit it. Let’s call it a truce on that, okay?”

“Right after I tell you one thing. It hurt like hell when I found out you’d come back and didn’t let me know. I had to find out from a newspaper article, for God’s sake! And it was one announcing your engagement—to Todd Hardy, of all people.”

“I made him promise not to announce it until I said he could. It wasn’t my fault that he broke his promise. I wanted to tell you first, because I knew how you’d feel when you saw it. I *tried* to call you, too—many times. But I always chickened out. I was still trying last night. There. I explained how it happened. Can we drop it now?”

“You’re right. Let’s enjoy each other.”

Drawing her closer, Nick bore his lips down against hers in a heated kiss.

Jessie tightened her hold. Nick was the best kisser she’d ever known, but she shouldn’t accept him because of her engagement. She should push away from him—but she couldn’t. His embrace felt so right, his lips worked so passionately against hers, that she found her body responding to him against her mind’s dictates.

It felt good to be in his arms again. The years between their first kiss and now seemed to melt away in a haze of sensations that she had wondered if she would ever experience again. These were the feelings that only Nick had ever shown her, and she hadn’t realized how much she’d missed the excitement he unfailingly gave her until she hadn’t had it.

To her dismay, he caressed her shoulders and pushed her away, gazing down at her with desire gleaming in his bright green eyes.

“God, that’s great to do again, Jess,” he said heatedly. “But we’d better eat now.”

“I suppose we should,” she mumbled. Then she fled into the kitchen, so he wouldn’t see how much it upset her that he’d quit kissing her. It was hard enough for her to accept that she’d so willingly accepted him. She didn’t want him to think that he could try such a thing again. To keep her emotions to herself, she spoke cheerfully. “I’ll make the salad.”

After they ate, Jessie loaded the dishwasher just as the phone rang.

“Would you get that for me, Nick?”

Nick strode over and took the handset from the wall phone. “Nelson residence.”

“The Jessica Nelson residence?” a man asked suspiciously.

“Yes.”

“Who *is* this?”

“A friend,” Nick replied. “May I say who’s calling?”

“Todd Hardy,” he replied.

“Damn! Just a minute. Jess! It’s your fiancé.”

Jessie joined Nick and accepted the handset he held toward her. “Thanks. Why don’t you get my keys off the counter and go down to my car. Dessert’s in the trunk.”

“Which one’s your car?”

“The red Mazda RX7.”

“Jessica!” she heard Todd call sternly before she put the receiver to her ear.

“Hi, Todd,” she replied. “I didn’t expect to hear from you all weekend.”

“Obviously. You’d better have a good explanation for a man being there.”

Determined to change the subject, Jessie questioned him in her calmest tone. “Let’s talk about something else. How was your day?”

For several minutes they chatted, but Jessie couldn’t shake the tense feeling coursing through her. Todd was being too possessive for her liking, and she wasn’t sure how to cure him of that.

“Look, Jessica,” he said, returning to the original topic. “I don’t like you having an old friend over for dinner when I can’t be there—especially a man. It isn’t appropriate.”

Stunned by his angry, demanding tone, she replied defensively. “We’re just having dinner and talking. Nick’s the one I told you is taking care my estate.”

“Then his wife’s there, too.”

“As a matter of fact, Nick got a divorce. It’s just the two of us.”

“You shouldn’t turn to another man when I’m gone.”

“I’m not turning to anybody, Todd,” she replied calmly. “I’m having dinner with an old friend. Why are you so upset about this? It’s a harmless meal.”

“Harmless meals can turn into liaisons.”

“I don’t believe this!” she exclaimed as Nick entered the apartment. “You don’t trust me at all!”

She watched as he strolled toward her, his long, well-toned legs exposed to her view by his cut-off jeans. If people had told her years ago that she would forget how well he was built, she never would have believed them. But that’s exactly what had happened.

Then Todd’s voice interrupted her thoughts as he returned her accusation flatly. “It isn’t you I don’t trust, Jessie. It’s that bastard.”

Fury swept through her at his unwarranted jealousy. She’d never done anything to lead him to believe that she would be unfaithful. Unable to restrain her anger, she demanded, “Don’t *ever* talk about my friends like that!” She turned her gaze on Nick, watching with a half-smile as he approached her. He looked great in his shorts and knit shirt. And nothing turned her on more than

a pair of firm thighs and long legs—just like Nick’s! He stepped behind her and slid his arms around her waist. She stared up at him and sighed. “And especially not Nick. He would *never* do anything to hurt me.”

To her amazement, he broke contact, his face masked with distress. Spinning from her, he went out on the patio. Jessie followed and laid her hand on his shoulder blade while he stared out over the Pacific Ocean from the balcony. She knew what he was thinking about, and she knew how much it still bothered him. He never would have mentioned it last night if it didn’t. Somehow, she had to put his mind at rest, to ease the guilt that had been eating at him for the past six years.

“Jessica Nelson!” Todd said sternly into her ear. “What’s going on there?”

Her voice filled with bitterness despite her tender grasp of Nick’s shoulder. “It’s none of your business.”

“I’m coming home tonight.”

“Don’t bother, Todd,” she replied. “Nothing’s going to happen between Nick and me. We’re really just friends.”

Again, Nick broke away from her. Jessie’s heart went out to him. After all these years, she could read him as well as if they hadn’t been separated for more than an hour. He was thinking about her saying that they were just friends. He was wondering how she could say that after everything that had happened that fateful morning. But the memory of that morning made her heart ache every time she thought of it.

Jessie watched as he paced the patio. They had a lot to talk about tonight—a lot that she’d hoped she could avoid saying. She had to admit the entire truth, no matter how deeply it hurt her—not to mention him.

“But I love you,” Todd said into her ear. “I don’t want you spending time with any man but me.”

“He’s no threat to our relationship, Todd,” she explained. “He spent the night here last night and nothing happened.”

“He spent the night?” Todd asked in astonishment. “How could you *do* that to me after I announced our engagement?”

The reminder of his broken promise brought back her anger. “I won’t discuss that over the phone. I’ve got to go. Nick and I haven’t had dessert yet. Good-bye, Todd.”

“I’ll be there about eleven, Jessie,” Todd warned just before she hung up. “Make sure Ramsdale’s gone—for good.”

Following Jessie into the apartment, Nick leaned against the archway beside the phone base as she replaced the handset and said, “You shouldn’t have left the cake in the trunk, Jessie. The

frosting melted to the plastic.”

“That’s okay. I’ll stick it in the freezer for a few minutes. That should harden it pretty quickly.”

“Don’t bother,” he said as she picked up the box. “I’m stuffed from dinner.”

“Okay.” Jessie put the cake into the refrigerator, then closed the door and leaned against it, her arms crossed under her breasts.

Turning his back on her, he wandered into the living room and collapsed onto the white contemporary couch. She followed and sat on the opposite end. As she bent her leg to face him directly, he gazed over at her and shook his head slowly. Jessie had no doubt about what he was thinking.

“We have to talk, Nick.” Her heart ached over what she was about to confess. What he felt now was nothing compared to what he would feel when she told him her secret. In fact, she would be surprised if he stayed long enough for Todd to get there and send him away.

“No, we don’t,” he said firmly. “It’s just a wonderful nightmare that we should keep in the past where it belongs.”

“That nightmare still haunts you, and it’s not going to stop until we talk it out.”

“No!” He shot to his feet and rushed toward the door so fast that Jessie barely had time to block his exit. “Get the hell out of my way.”

She stared up at him with more determination than she’d ever had in her life. She was at least as determined to discuss this as he was *not* to. Every other time, she’d let Nick have his way. Now that she could see what it had done to him, she couldn’t let it go on for another minute. “You’re not leaving until we talk about this—even if I have to stand here all night.”

“I will *not* talk about this. Do you understand?”

“Talk about what?” she prodded.

“You know what.”

“No, I don’t. We may not even mean the same thing.”

“We *always* mean the same thing. It doesn’t matter who starts the conversation. We always know what the other’s talking about.”

“Maybe that’s changed. Now what don’t you want to discuss?”

“That night, damn it,” he returned angrily. “And you know it.”

“What night?”

“The last one we were together.”

“Last night?”

Nick grabbed her shoulders, his fury vividly displayed in his eyes; but she stared up at him innocently, as though she really didn't understand. His expression softened in an instant, and he massaged her shoulders gently. “You've become a good actress, Jessie. I almost believe that you don't know which night I'm talking about.”

“*Tell* me which night.”

He released her and turned his back on her again. As much as it hurt to do this to him, she couldn't stop goading him. It was the only way she could think of to get him to open up to her. Only then could she admit the truth about what had happened that night. She knew how much it hurt him to think about it, but they *had* to air this.

Again, she laid her hand on his back, this time rubbing it tenderly. If she did anything that night, it would be getting Nick to admit what he believed, even if his belief was wrong. After all these years, she'd thought he would come to his senses, but she'd obviously been wrong. Somehow, she had to get him to realize the truth.

“I know what you're doing, Jess,” he said, his voice filled with the pain in his heart, “but I can't say it.”

“Say what?” Wrapping her arms around him, she sighed inwardly as he returned her secure embrace. “We need to talk, Nick. We have to settle everything about that night.” When he released her, she tightened her hold and wouldn't let him push her away. With a sigh of resignation, he embraced her again while she admitted, “I knew all along what you meant. I *always* know what you mean. But I don't want you to tell me just for you. I want you to say it for me, too.”

“For you?” he asked, stunned. “Why for you?”

“Unless you admit it, I won't be able to go on with the conversation.”

“Honest?”

“I've never lied to you, Nick. Not once.”

“I guess you haven't. In fact, there were times when you were brutally honest. All right. I'll say it.” He inhaled deeply. Again, she sensed what he was thinking, that once he voiced what was in his mind, she would break away from him—maybe forever. But she had no intention of doing such a thing. “I'm talking about the night that I ... Oh, God, Jess. I don't know if I can say this. The night that I ... forced my attentions on you.” He tightened his hold, and tears came to her eyes. “God, this hurts.”

“Not as much as it's going to.” Her heart broke in sympathy. He still hadn't said what she knew was in his heart, and it was imperative that he voice the words to cleanse his soul. “That's



not what you believe, Nick. Tell me honestly what you say in your mind—and your heart—when you think about that night.”

“Rape,” he spat out painfully. “I call it acquaintance rape.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. He’d finally said the words, and she could feel in her own heart how much they hurt him. Maybe now she could help him heal his wounds.

“I don’t,” she assured him in a tender tone. “I’ll admit that I said no at first—even that I fought against you and begged you not to. But that was only in the beginning. I could have stopped you—if I’d really *wanted* to.”

Tears came to his eyes, and Jessie knew they were tears of regret and grief over their failed friendship.

“Oh, God, Jess!” he said. “I’m so sorry. I never said that. I just asked for your forgiveness.”

“Listen to me, Nick,” she insisted sternly. “I *wanted* you to make love to me, but I was afraid at first. My upbringing always said not before marriage, and *never* with a married man. I was *glad* that you forced the issue.”

Nick stepped back and stared at her in shock. Although tears streaked his cheeks, he was no longer crying. He appeared numb now, unable to believe what she’d just said. “You *wanted* me?”

“That’s right. We have more to discuss, too.” She studied his expression intently. There had to be a better way to explain than mere words. “Would you take a ride with me?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Someplace very important. Let me get my purse, and I’ll drive.”

## THREE

Nick stared down in disbelief. Dropping to one knee, he tentatively touched the cool, moonlit stone. It was real all right—so real that it was carved in granite. He traced the letters: *Nicholas Porter Ramsdale*.

Nicholas Porter Ramsdale. Jessie hadn't said the words, but there was no denying it. Nicholas Porter Ramsdale was his son—at least, he had been. After an hour and a half of lying in Jessie's arms, they had produced a child.

Coming out of his daze, he noticed that Jessie was kneeling beside him, writing something in Magic Marker on the balloon she'd brought. He glanced down to see what she was saying. *To our dear Nicky, Here is your first balloon. Love always, Mommy and Daddy.*

Without a word, she tied it to the wire cone meant to hold flowers. The gentle trade wind lifted the helium-filled balloon until the paper ribbon stopped it. His heart ached as he stared up at the flowered balloon.

Beside him, Jessie spoke in a cracking near-whisper that told him she felt the same as he did. "Now we've done something together for our son."

Nick's chest tightened with emotional agony. She'd finally said the words that he'd longed to hear ever since he'd read the headstone. Our son. What a bittersweet joy.

The balloon bobbed as another breeze caught it, and his attention turned to the view of Diamond Head in the background.

How appropriate, Jessie thought. She'd always envisioned Nicky sitting on the tip of the most famous spot in Hawaii, watching over her and Nick and wishing he could be with his parents. Together they'd given him the gift of life, which had lasted only days. Now, together, they'd given him the gift of a balloon.

Tears blurred her vision as she rose, staring at the balloon in silence while Nick draped his arm around her shoulders. When she looked up at him, she saw that he, too, was staring at Diamond Head. The tears in his eyes told her that he also grieved. But were they a result of the death of his son—or her cruel secret?

"You could have told me," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I wanted to, Nick." The tears in her eyes now flowed down her cheeks. "I wanted to tell you as soon as I found out. I wanted to tell you when he was born. I wanted to tell you when I came here with his tiny body. I *tried* to tell you. But I was only here for two days, and I couldn't get up the courage to finish the phone call. Then I tried to tell you every July 13 when I made the trip to be with him on his birthday. But it tore me apart to be away from him, so I moved back."

"Didn't your parents know? I mean, they never said anything to me when I ran into them."

"I swore them to secrecy. I didn't want you to hear about him from anybody but me. I thought I'd be able to tell you long before this, Nick. I really did. But there was Cathy. That's why I couldn't tell you when I found out I was pregnant. I couldn't see what purpose it would serve. I knew how badly you wanted children; you'd talked about it often enough. Telling you after his birth would have been ludicrous, because the doctors said all along that he wouldn't make it."

"I could have been there to see him alive, Jess," he said. "I could have been there to comfort you. We could have gone through it together."

"You were *married*—to a woman who despises me, who *I* despised in return. I couldn't call you under those circumstances, because I knew you had obligations." Jessie released a ragged sigh and snuggled against him. That was only a partial truth, and she'd promised herself that she would be honest with him. Oh, well, she may as well get it over with, because it would all come out eventually, anyway. "But that wasn't the only reason. Don't you see, Nick? I wanted to spare you. I knew how upset you'd be, and what you didn't know couldn't hurt you. *That's* why I didn't tell you."

Nick embraced her, tangling his fingers in her long hair while she sobbed against his chest. "I know exactly why you didn't tell me, honey. And I can't say that I would have handled it differently had our positions been reversed. I wouldn't have wanted to hurt you, either."

Returning his embrace, she gazed up at him. There was a warm smile on his lips, one that showed his forgiveness better than words ever could. "Dear God," she prayed aloud as she tightened her hug on Nick, "thank you."

"For what?" he asked.

"For you." She gazed up at him again, her whole being filled with the mixture of sorrow and joy. "You're the most understanding man on earth. You have to be after what I did to you by keeping Nicky secret for so long. You should be furious with me."

"I understand why you did it, because I love you."

“Love,” she repeated. “I wouldn’t know the meaning of the word today if it hadn’t been for Nicky. Our son taught me to love, Nick. Before I was pregnant, I didn’t understand what love was. That’s probably why I had so much trouble accepting yours.”

“Do you know what it is now?”

“Oh, yes. But I sure couldn’t explain it.”

“Good, because that means you understand what *true* love is. That’s not something you can explain. It’s only something you feel. It’s here ...” He released her with one hand to lay it lightly on her chest. “... in your heart. And it’s definitely here ...” This time he laid his hand on his own chest. “... in *my* heart—for you. Give back that big, glittery rock on your hand. Let me put a small one there.”

Frightened of the emotions rampaging through her, she pushed away and stared down at Nicky’s headstone. She wasn’t ready to hear what Nick was saying. The feelings that overcame her at the mere mention of his name were too violent to consider.

“Don’t turn your back on me,” he said as he slid his arms around her waist.

“Don’t!” she shrieked, frantically breaking his hold. “Don’t be nice to me. I was terrible to you—because I didn’t tell you about Nicky. So, don’t be nice to me. I don’t deserve it.”

She raced toward the car with Nick following. When she reached the driver’s door, his long fingers wrapped around her upper arm, and he spun her around to face him. A moment later, he pinned her against the Mazda.

With his body pressed against hers, excitement flooded her veins. She wanted him again—as much as she’d wanted him that night six years ago. But she was still afraid. Even though the feelings hadn’t physically hurt her, they had emotionally. She couldn’t bear that kind of hurt again. From the moment he slid his fingers into her hair, she knew his kiss was coming. She also knew she had to distract him.

“He was premature,” Jessie explained in a shaky voice.

“I could see that by the headstone,” he worded heatedly. “He was born only six and a half months after our night together. Now, don’t deny what’s happening here.”

“I’m not denying anything,” she returned.

He spoke his next words slowly, distinctly, enunciating each syllable. “I love you, Jessica.”

“You love a memory from eleven years ago. You’ve always loved a memory.”

“I’ve always loved *you*,” he proclaimed so clearly that she couldn’t mistake his feelings for anything else. Nick really did love her, she realized as he added, “And I always will.”

His lips captured hers. His tongue forced its way into her mouth to taunt hers delectably, excitingly, heatedly. Her heart pounded in her chest, harder than she'd ever thought possible. She wanted him—but she wanted him to stop, too. She was afraid that he was acting out of grief, out of desire to try for another child. Oh, how she longed to give him another child!

But another child would never replace Nicky. Another child would only make her want him back all the more. Besides, another child—especially Nick's—would only complicate their lives further, and she had enough complications to last her a lifetime. No, she needed to gather her courage and go on, without Nick to make her want his child.

At last, her mind gained control over her body. Mustering her strength, she pushed him away. Nick fell to the gravel driveway and gazed up at her in stunned disbelief. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"You don't love me," she stubbornly insisted. "You just want another baby. Well, I won't give you one. Find some other woman to seduce, because I won't risk losing another baby—*ever*. Besides, I'm engaged to Todd. You keep forgetting that."

Jessie threw open the car door and got in behind the wheel, slamming the door behind her. No man was going to seduce her again, especially not Nick Ramsdale. Irritated, she dug through her purse for her keys. Where were they, anyway? They were supposed to be in their special pouch, but they were gone.

Her car door opened, and she looked over at Nick irately. A moment later, her keys dangled before her eyes.

"Looking for these?" he asked.

She grabbed for the keys. Wrapping his hand around them, Nick jerked his arm back so fast that she grabbed only a handful of air.

"Give me those," she demanded.

"You're the one who wanted me to drive home," he reminded her, gently grasping her upper arm. "That's why you gave me the keys, remember?"

"Give them to me."

"Out," he ordered.

"No."

"Sometimes I forget how exasperating you can be," he said as he pulled her from the car. "Aren't you ever going to lose that stubborn streak of yours?"

She stood before him proudly, not taking her irritated gaze from his face. "Never. Now

give me back my keys.”

“When I get you home.” A smile came to his lips, the same boyish grin that he used every time he wanted to lighten the tension when they argued. Once again, Jessie realized, his charm had calmed her. Then he spoke words that tore savagely at her heart. “Otherwise, you’ll leave me stranded here with our son. Then I’ll have to *walk* back to your place.”

Jessie stared up at him. Her heart ached. How could Nick accuse her of abandoning their son? It was such a cruel thing to say, to even *think*. After all the years he’d been with her, he should know that she would never do such a thing. To hide her distress, she spoke defiantly. “I did *not* strand Nicky. I brought him to the place I call home. I brought him here so he would be near his father—so he could be near *you*. Why can’t you understand that?”

“I didn’t mean it that way, honey,” he explained. Steering her around the car, he opened the passenger door. “I meant that you would leave me with Nicky, not that you stranded him.” Again, he turned her toward him and grasped her head. “I’m sorry I gave you the wrong impression, honey. It was completely unintentional. I was just trying to relieve some of the tension.”

“There wouldn’t *be* any tension if you would remember that I’m engaged—if you would stop trying to seduce me.”

“I’ll try, but I can’t promise anything. Somehow I have to convince you that you’re marrying the wrong man.” Laying his hands on her shoulders, he gently pushed her down into the passenger seat. After he got in behind the wheel, he slid the key in the ignition and started the motor. Instead of putting the car in gear, he faced her once more. “I love you, Jessie, and someday—soon, I hope—I’m going to steal you away from Hardy. He’s using you, and I’m going to prove it—not just to you, but to the whole damned world.”

When Jessie started yawning around ten o’clock, Nick suggested that they go to bed.

“*We*?” she asked in shock. “After what I told you at the cemetery? Are you crazy?”

“That’s not what I meant,” he returned with a chuckle. “I was talking about you going to bed in your room. I’ll sleep in your guest room like last night.”

“Oh,” she said, grimacing as she rose from the couch. “I’m sorry I accused you of wanting more. I really should get to bed, though. Even after all the sleep I got today, I’m tired. And I’ve *got* to work tomorrow. I lost a top-secret document, and I have to find it, so I don’t get fired. Or worse yet, thrown into jail.”

Nick stared at her in stunned disbelief. “You lost a *what*?”

“You gone deaf in your old age, Ramsdale? I lost a top-secret document, and I’d rather

not talk about it. You don't have a need to know. Or, for you espionage writers who don't understand *governmentese*, it's none of your business. Now, if you want to stay up and watch TV, go ahead. I'm going to bed. Good night."

"Good night," he responded as she disappeared into her bedroom.

Nick stared at the television set but didn't notice the action-adventure movie playing. Jessie had lost a top-secret document. That meant she was in serious trouble—more serious than he'd imagined. Even if she wasn't the mother of his child, he would have been concerned.

His child, he thought dreamily. When they'd returned to her condo, she'd shown him some photographs of the baby. Even with all the tubes and wires attached to the child, Nicky was still the most beautiful baby he'd ever seen. Of course, he was! Nicky was his child—his and Jessie's. No child could be more beautiful than theirs.

Nick withdrew a photograph from the pocket of his knit shirt and studied it again. Nicholas Porter Ramsdale. She'd even named the baby after him. And she'd given him this picture to keep in remembrance of the child that he would never know.

If he'd kept in touch with Jessie, they could have gotten married. Then their child would have had two loving parents during his short life.

Yet he understood why Jessie hadn't told him about Nicky, probably too well. He felt the same distress that she did over their loss. If only she'd told him about Nicky when he was born. Maybe he could have spared Jessie some of the pain.

A knock jolted Nick to reality, and he raced from the guest room to answer the door. To his surprise, a tall, good-looking, blond man stood in the hall, his face set with rage.

"What the hell's going on here?" Todd Hardy demanded as he stared at Nick.

Glancing down, Nick realized that he was wearing only his briefs. He'd been so deep in thought that he hadn't even realized that he'd gotten ready for bed.

"Answer me, damn it!" Todd raged. "What are you doing with my fiancée?"

"Calm down," Nick replied in a whisper. "She's sleeping. I imagine the neighbors are, too."

Todd pushed Nick out of the way and barged into the apartment while Nick closed the door. Turning to the slightly shorter man, Nick clenched his fists, ready for a physical confrontation. From the look on Todd's chiseled features, however, that wouldn't be necessary. Nick relaxed slightly as he examined his opponent for Jessie's affections. Obviously, Todd realized when a man was more powerful than he and didn't want to start anything he couldn't handle.

“How do you know she’s sleeping?” Todd asked, studying Nick suspiciously.

Nick shook his head slowly and groaned, “Oh, for God’s sake. She had an emotionally wrenching evening, so she went to bed. She was exhausted, so if she *is* awake, it’s because of *you*.”

“I suppose you had something to do with this emotionally wrenching evening.”

“I know who you are, Hardy,” Nick announced, abruptly changing the subject, “and it’s a hell of a lot more than just a state senator. I also know what you’re doing to Jessie. But I’m going to stop you—even if I have to give up my life to do it.”

“What are you talking about?” Todd asked.

“You and what you’re doing.”

“Oh,” he said, nodding his head. “You read about my bid for the United States Congress.”

“Yeah,” Nick returned flatly. “I know all about it.”

“You can’t seriously believe that I’m using Jessie to get to the Senate. She doesn’t have any Washington connections—not the kind I need, anyway.”

“Then you admit that she has connections.”

“Of course, I admit it,” Todd said. “But she was with the Department of Defense. Those aren’t the kind of connections I can use.”

Nick stifled his rage. He’d been right all along. Hardy *did* know what Jessie did for a living. At least, he knew what she’d done in the past, and it only followed that he knew what she did in the present. To hide his suspicions, Nick replied flatly. “Maybe they’re not the kind you’re after.”

“You know,” Todd said, eyeing Nick with a suspicious expression, “you have me at a disadvantage. You know who I am, but I don’t even know your name. And there you are, standing there in your underwear, making accusations that are completely incoherent.”

“I’m Nick Ramsdale. And my accusations may be incoherent to anybody else—including Jessie. But you know exactly what I’m talking about.” Nick glared at Todd. “The majority of your constituents may believe your act, but I’m not one of them. I can see through that façade of yours to what’s underneath. And I’ll tell you exactly what that is—*slime*.”

“You’re making no sense, my friend. In fact, I doubt you could prosecute me for slander and win if I called you a raving lunatic in public. Just what kind of connections do you think I’m after?” He paused a moment as if for effect. “And where do you get off making these accusations?”



“To begin with,” Nick replied, “I’m not your friend, and I never will be. In fact, it would be safe to say that I’m your enemy. Now that you’ve been warned, you would be wise keep your eye out for me. I’m going to be watching every move you make, because I know your past isn’t as clean as you want people to think. I also know why you’ve never asked Jess what she does for a living. You knew before that car accident, and you probably caused it just to meet her.”

Todd’s expression turned to one of concern as Nick spoke.

“What are you going to do?” Todd demanded. “Wait a minute! You’re going to do something to frame me, so you can have Jessie. That’s what all your crazy talk is about. Well, it won’t work. I love Jessie, and she loves me.”

“Jessie isn’t stupid,” Nick countered. “As soon as I can prove my suspicions, I’ll tell her about them. Then she’ll come to her senses.”

“What suspicions could you possibly have concerning me?”

“If I told you that,” Nick returned, “you could cover your tracks. But I can assure you that I know exactly what you’re trying to do. In fact, I know a hell of a lot more about you than you do about me.”

“Of course, you do. My name and picture are in the papers all the time. I’m getting ready to run for the United States Senate. I’ve done as much as I can in Hawaii. It’s time to move upward. It’s time to start making my bid for the White House.”

“The White House!” Nick exclaimed with a sarcastic laugh. “You won’t make it to the white *dog* house. And do you know why? Because *I’m* going to stop you. And I’m sure as hell going to stop you from meeting Jessie at the altar. Three weeks, Hardy. That’s all it will take for me to ruin your life.”

Todd stared at Nick in shock. Without considering the possible ramifications of his actions, Nick grabbed Todd’s suit jacket lapels and jerked him so close that their faces were only inches apart. Nick spat out his next words menacingly.

“Did you hear me, Hardy? Three weeks—or *less*—and your life’s going to lie in ruins at your feet. You’d better get ready for the fight of your life, Hardy, because I’m going to win Jessie—and destroy *you* in the process.”

“Let go, Ramsdale, or I’ll file assault charges.” Nick loosened his grip slowly, and Todd released a relieved sigh. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but you’re way off base with your accusations—whatever they mean. Now I’m going to ask you one question, then I’m going to leave. Did you sleep with my fiancée?”

Nick grinned vengefully, glad that Todd had worded his question that way. Now he could answer honestly—even if he wouldn’t tell the man that it hadn’t happened tonight. “Not only

did I, but she wanted me as much as I did her. She told me so. Now get the hell out of here before I tear you apart and forget the formalities of destroying you.”

“You may have won her body, Ramsdale,” Todd proclaimed calmly as he left. “But you’ll never win her hand.”

“She sure as hell won’t marry *you*—not if I have anything to say about it!” Nick shouted down the hall after him.

Closing the door, Nick went back to the guest room and lay down. He didn’t like his encounter with Hardy. The man was up to something. Nick could feel it in his gut, that nagging sensation in the pit of his stomach. He got it every time something happened that told him he should back off on in his research. That gut instinct was starting to hurt again, too.

Creeping into Jessie’s bathroom, he looked in her medicine cabinet. As he’d hoped, he found a bottle of Pepto Bismol. Taking the measuring cup off the cap, he opened the bottle and measured the amount he needed into the cup. After gulping it down, he rinsed the cup and put everything back the way he’d found it.

At last, he went back to bed, content knowing he’d shown Hardy that he wasn’t going to sit back and let Jessie get away from him again. All he had to do was prove the hearsay information about Todd that he’d run across while he was researching his next book.

## FOUR

Work went smoother for Jessie the next day. For three hours she diligently searched the files in the vault. When the secured landline on her desk rang, she rushed into the nearest office to answer it.

“Good morning, beautiful,” Todd said cheerfully. “I thought I’d never find you.”

“Todd!” she exclaimed. “Did you come back last night? Or are you calling from Maui?”

“I came back,” he replied. “And I had a nice little chat with your *guest*. I’m surprised he didn’t tell you about it. After all, he told me that he’d slept with you.”

Nick had told Todd *what?* Of all the nerve! But it wasn’t Todd’s fault that Nick had lied, and she didn’t want to argue with her intended. She would save her anger for the man who deserved it.

“No, he didn’t,” she said. “He was watching TV when I went to bed. And he was sleeping in the guest room when I got up this morning.”

“The man threatened me, Jessie,” Todd announced. “And he made some accusations that I didn’t appreciate—or consider being anything other than serious.”

That certainly sounded like something Nick would do. He always had been overly protective of her. But despite her irritation, she questioned Todd calmly. “What kind of accusations?”

“He wouldn’t say. Who is that guy, anyway?”

“I’ve already explained that. Nick’s an old friend.”

“I know that. But what does he do for a living? How do you know him? Where does he get off saying the things he did?”

“You’ve never heard of Nick Ramsdale?” she asked. “He writes spy novels—espionage, undercover stuff, that kind of thing. He’s really good, and I’m not just saying that because he’s a close friend. I also told you how I know him. He was my college English professor before we dated. As for what he said, I don’t have the faintest notion. I didn’t hear your

conversation.”

“There’s more to it than that, isn’t there.”

“I don’t know why you think that.”

“Because of the way he acted. He was awfully defensive of you, Jessie. He came awfully close to punching my lights out, too. And from the looks of him, he could have done it—even though I do have those awards.”

Jessie envisioned Nick. He was probably the best built man she’d ever run across. That was the main thing that had attracted her to him in the first place. In class, she’d often lost track of what he was saying because she was so engrossed in her fantasies of being alone with him.

The last day of school her dreams had become reality when he called her aside after class to invite her on a picnic. Although she’d been thrilled by the prospect, she’d also been reluctant. But he’d taken away her fears of their age difference by offering to bring his thirteen-year-old brother along. To keep him in line, he’d said with a mischievous wink.

That was the first time she’d seen Nick in shorts—cut-offs to be precise, skin-tight, faded blue jeans. Immediately, she’d fallen in love with his strong, athletic legs; immediately, she’d begun having a new kind of daydream. It was the same daydream she’d had about him every day for the next eleven years. And it was probably the same one she would have for the rest of her life.

“Jessie,” Todd asked irritably, “are you still there?”

Disappointment flooded through her. She didn’t want to hear Todd’s voice; she wanted to hear Nick’s. “I’m sorry, Todd. I was just thinking.”

“About how good last night was no doubt,” he returned.

“My evening wasn’t as great as you want to believe,” she explained. “For the most part, it was miserable. I had to do something I didn’t particularly want to.”

“Funny. I got the impression that you adore Ramsdale. You seem to go off on some inner trip every time I mention his name.”

“Please don’t act jealous, Todd,” she replied softly to reassure him. None of this was his fault, and she didn’t want him upset by Nick’s sudden appearance in her life. The best way to redirect his jealousy was to remain calm and explain fully. “Nick’s a very good friend, and we’ve had some great times together. It’s fun to relive the memories. But that’s really all there is to it—no matter *what* he told you.”

Todd sighed into her ear, and Jessie released a mental sigh that she’d allayed his distress

over Nick's attitude last night; although, she really did need to discuss it with Nick as soon as she could.

"All right, sweetheart," Todd said, bringing her back to reality. "I trust you. Now about why I called. I wanted you to know that I have to go back to Maui this afternoon. I'm not done with my business."

"Then you shouldn't have come home."

"I had to." His voice was finally calm again as he explained. "You were spending the evening with another man, and I needed to make sure he knew that I wouldn't let you go so easily. You're going to marry me, Jessie. How can you expect me *not* to be jealous? Which reminds me, are you going to entertain him again this evening?"

"I don't know." She paused, unsure she should admit that she'd been thinking along those lines all morning. "Maybe." Immediately, she regretted her confession, so she added, "And maybe not."

"Then I'll come back again tonight—and every other night that I have to be out of town. I have to make sure that you and Ramsdale don't renew any old times that you shouldn't."

Jessie didn't know if she was pleased that he loved her enough to fight for her—or angered because he was being so possessive. "You can't keep checking up on me, Todd."

"If you love me, you won't see him again."

*That* did it. She hated it when men used that tired line—as if love was a one-way street, from the woman's direction.

"And if you love *me*," she countered, "you won't smother me. Nick's my friend; we have a special bond that can't be broken."

"This sounds like you've already made plans to get together with him tonight. Cancel them."

Jessie breathed through gritted teeth. He had just stepped onto ground that she refused to relinquish. Todd being her fiancé didn't give him any right to run her life. If she wanted to do something, she would. She didn't care if she had Todd's approval or not.

"I have no intention of telling you my plans for tonight," she declared. "You won't even be here, so you have no say in the matter."

"Don't you dare see him again, Jessica Nelson," Todd ordered.

That was the end! He'd just done the only thing he could to insure she saw Nick that night. He'd told her not to. Nothing he could say or do—not even an apology—would change

her mind. She would call Nick as soon as she could and ask him to dinner.

“I mean it, Jessie,” Todd continued when she didn’t reply. “Don’t you ever see Nick Ramsdale again.”

“I’m not going to discuss this over the phone, Todd,” she said, struggling to keep her voice calm. “Besides, I have to get back to work. Good-bye.”

She slammed the handset onto the phone, staring at it angrily. Nobody was going to tell her what to do, especially not Todd Hardy. But if she called Nick right away, Todd would know what she was doing. She needed to wait until after lunch to make the phone call. Better yet, she would do it from a phone booth, if she could find one, so Todd wouldn’t get a busy signal if he called back.

Jessie hung up the phone slowly. Where could Nick be? She’d tried his cell phone a number of times, but it went directly to voice mail.

Going back to the office, she unlocked the door and signed the space below where she had signed out when she left. She may as well get back to work and try to forget Nick. The only reason she’d wanted to contact him in the first place was to show Todd that he couldn’t tell her what to do. Like her mother always said, if somebody told her to do something, she would go out of her way not to—and vice versa.

After about twenty minutes, she went to her office for a glass of lemonade that she’d brought in a thermos. When she picked it up, she noticed that the lid wasn’t as tight as it usually was. She’d been so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn’t screwed it on well.

Pouring some into her glass, she took a long, thirst-quenching swallow. Almost immediately, she stopped drinking and grimaced. It was tarter than she remembered, probably because she’d had a Diet Coke with lunch. She took another gulp. That one went down easier. All she needed to do was get used to the bitterness after having had something sweet to drink. Thirsty, she took several more swallows on her way back to the vault where she was working.

Suddenly, pain shot through her stomach. Dropping her plastic glass, she doubled over in agony and made her way to the chair in the vault by sliding along the wall. She sat there for several minutes, but the pain continued. She never should have had Mexican food for lunch. Now she had indigestion—and no Pepto Bismol in her purse. She’d used the last of her chewable tablets two days ago.

Too bad her cell phone didn’t work in this area of the building. Getting up again, she made her way to the nearest phone and dialed out. The phone on the opposite end rang twice before Todd’s voice came to her. “I’m unable to come to the phone now. Please leave your name and number, and I’ll return your call as soon as possible.”

That's right! Todd had gone back to Maui. No sense in leaving a message. He couldn't get to her, anyway. She pushed the button down to disconnect the call then pushed some more numbers. Again, all she received was a recording. This time, however, she left a weak, barely audible message at the tone.

"Nick, it's Jessie. I'm really sick. Please. Come get me at ..."

Before she could finish, blackness overwhelmed her. She only vaguely felt her head hit the desk as she collapsed.

After wandering in from the beach, Nick reached into the refrigerator for two beers and handed one to Steve. They sat down at the kitchen table before Steve questioned his brother in concern while he stared at the photo before him.

"Are you absolutely sure, Nick? I mean, you told me that you'd never ..."

"I lied," Nick admitted sadly. "I had—once."

"And that did it?" Steve asked in amazement. "Just one time? I mean, most couples try for a while before the woman gets pregnant. And Jessie did just like that?"

"Just like that," Nick repeated. "She named him after me, too—even gave him my last name. Nicholas Porter Ramsdale. She took me to his grave last night. I saw it for myself. And I went back this morning to make sure it wasn't a dream."

Steve ran his fingers through his curly, dark hair. "I can't get over this. You, a daddy. And you never even suspected it."

"I never even got to see him. Jessie thought I was still married to Cathy. Ironic, isn't it. Just two weeks before Nicky's birth, my divorce was final."

"If you ask me, it's more sad than ironic. You could have been with them when they needed you. Instead, Jessie had to go through it alone."

"Yeah, I know." Nick took a swig of his beer directly from the can then gazed sorrowfully at his brother. "We gave him a balloon."

"A balloon?" Steve asked.

Taking the snapshot from his brother, Nick gazed at it longingly. "It was symbolic. We gave him life, even though it was short, so we gave him a balloon, too."

Rising, Steve wandered to the family room while Nick followed. When he reached the telephone stand by the patio doors, he glanced down and said, "You have a message on your

machine.”

Nick absently joined Steve and pushed the play button. He’d kept the antiquated phone, so Jessie could get in touch with him whenever she needed him. When the tape stopped re-winding, he listened silently to the strange, yet familiar voice that spoke to him. “Nick, it’s Jessie. I’m really sick. Please. Come get me at …” There was the sound of the phone clattering to the desk, then a thud of some sort. As Nick opened his mouth to speak, he heard another noise. Finally, the machine said, “That was your last message.”

Nick’s heart leapt into his throat. He didn’t like the sound of her voice—not to mention the odd noises that followed it. His arm shot out and pushed the “Save” button on the answering machine.

“Oh, my God!” he exclaimed in a panic. “Something happened to Jessie.”

“She probably fainted.”

“It’s more than that,” Nick insisted. He pushed the play button and listened to the recording again. “Listen carefully.” They heard Jessie’s words, the phone on the desk, the thud, something else, then the answering machine’s computerized voice. Nick saved the message again.

“Did you hear it?” Nick asked, struggling to keep his voice calm.

“Yeah,” Steve admitted, “but I don’t know what it was.”

“Footsteps.”

“Are you sure?” Steve asked skeptically.

“Positive. Jessie’s in trouble.” Thinking quickly, he took the tape out of the machine so her message wouldn’t be inadvertently recorded over and pocketed it. Then he took another tape from the drawer of the table and slipped it into the machine before turning toward his brother. “Come on. We’re going after her.”

“You don’t even know where she is,” Steve reminded him as he hurried through the mansion behind Nick. “Besides, those footsteps you heard could have been her fiancé coming to help.”

“I doubt it.” Nick locked the front door behind them and raced to his Toyota RAV4 parked in the driveway while Steve ran to keep up with him. “Even if it was, I don’t trust him any farther than he could throw me.”

“So, call her before you go off on a tangent. That way you’ll know for sure if she’s alone or not.”



“For God’s sake, Steve. Think!” They got into his car, and Nick started the motor. “Put on your seat belt. I’m about to take you on the ride of your life.”

When Steve’s belt clicked into place, Nick shifted into gear and roared out of the driveway. Steve clung to the dashboard for balance.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Steve demanded. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

“Just hang on and shut up.” As Nick turned a corner, the wheels squealed in complaint. “I’m going to tell you something that you might not believe. Jessie isn’t at home. I can be sure of that for two reasons. One, she told me she was going to work today. And two, she wouldn’t have called me to come get her if she was at home. She works out at Wheeler Air Force Base, too—as an intelligence specialist. That means she works with top-secret documents on a regular basis. Now do you see why I’m so worried? If she’d known somebody was at the office with her, she wouldn’t have called me. She would have had sense enough to have that person take her home. Obviously, she *thought* she was alone.”

“Oh, God,” Steve groaned. “You’re right. And I thought your writer’s mind was working overtime again.” The car screeched around another curve, and a horn blared. Nick swerved back into his own lane, barely missing the other car. “God! Be careful, will you? We’re going to end up at the bottom of the ocean if you aren’t.”

“Quit complaining. Jessie’s life is at stake. I’m not going to dawdle when she needs my help.”

“But she might not *need* your help. Maybe her boss showed up and found her or something.”

“I don’t care,” Nick declared. “I’m getting there as fast as I can.”

“And how do you plan to get on post? You can’t just crash through the gate.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get on. Let’s cut the conversation so I can concentrate on driving.”

“Gladly,” Steve agreed without hesitation.

“Are you absolutely sure your girlfriend’s in there, Mr. Ramsdale?” the base policeman asked skeptically.

“For God’s sake,” Nick returned as he continued to pound on the locked door, “her car’s still in the parking lot. She *has* to be in there. Or is there some other place that they store top-secret material?”

“No, sir. This is it.”

“Jessie!” Nick shouted. “Jessie! Open up!” When she didn’t respond, he collapsed back against the door. “How are we going to get her out of there? She could be dying, and there’s not a damned thing I can do. I feel so helpless.”

“I still say her boss could have taken her home,” Steve said, laying his hand on Nick’s shoulder. “Maybe I could call her.”

“That’s a good idea,” the policeman agreed, studying Nick suspiciously. “You go ahead. I’ll wait here with Mr. Ramsdale.”

As Steve took Nick’s cell phone from him, Nick turned his gaze to the policeman. From the look in his blue eyes, he didn’t trust Nick. Of course, given the situation, he could hardly blame the young man. This was a top-secret suite. He probably thought he was being diverted so Nick could break in.

“Don’t worry,” Nick said to calm his anxiety. “I have no intention of stealing any critical information. I just want to get my girlfriend out of there. Hey, wait a sec! Surely, you cops know how to get hold of her boss. You’d *have* to, in case of an emergency.”

Jessie opened a door and entered the hallway leading to the suite of rooms for classified material. When she saw Nick leaning against the door with a security policeman standing before him, she stopped short. Curious, she approached them slowly. “What’s going on?”

“Jessie!” Nick exclaimed, racing to embrace her. “Thank God, you’re all right.”

“Of course, I’m all right,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“Don’t you remember, honey? You called me to come get you.”

“I did?” Pushing away from him, she stared up at him, confused by his statement. “When did I do that?”

Nick gazed down at her in concern. While she was in the bathroom, she’d discovered that she had cut her forehead somehow and a deep bruise had already swelled around it. To avoid infection, she’d put some Bacitracin on the wound then covered it with a flesh-colored Band-Aid.

Now he reached out and tenderly touched the injury just above her right eyebrow as he questioned her in concern. “What happened, Jess?”

She flinched slightly at the stinging pain and pulled her head back. “I don’t know. I had a terrible case of indigestion from the Mexican food I ate for lunch. I guess I passed out. I woke up on the floor by a desk. All I can figure is that I hit my head.”

“That must have happened while you were on the phone to my answering machine.”

“No. I hung up both times I tried calling you. I didn’t want to leave a message.”

“Well, you did.” He withdrew the tape in his shirt pocket and held it before her face. Her eyes focused on it while he added, “I have it right here. You asked me to come for you. Are you sure you don’t remember?”

“Positive. I felt awful, though. Maybe that’s why.”

“No wonder I couldn’t get you on the phone,” Steve said as he joined the trio after having wandered away for better reception.

Jessie shot her startled gaze to the young man; her mouth dropped open in astonishment. This *couldn’t* be Nick’s baby brother. Jessie looked from Steve to Nick then back again. They were definitely brothers, because they looked almost exactly alike. And Nick only had one brother, although he had several younger sisters. It *had* to be Steve. When she recovered enough to speak, she questioned him hesitantly. “Steve?”

“That’s right,” he admitted with a wide grin identical to Nick’s.

“My land!” she exclaimed. “Have you ever grown up! You’re almost as handsome as your big brother.”

“Don’t let Mom hear you say that,” Nick teased with a chuckle. “She likes to think we’re twins.”

“Except for the little bit of gray hair you have,” she returned, smiling, “you could be.”

“I’m glad you’re all right,” Steve said. “Nick almost ran down four cars trying to get here to save your life.”

“Save my life?” she repeated in astonishment. “Why would you think anything was that desperate?”

“Wait ‘til you hear ...” Steve stopped talking instantly, and Jessie glanced at Nick in time to see him shake his head with a look of warning in his green eyes. “Never mind. Now that we know she’s safe, brother, can we get out of here? Peggy’s going to wonder where I disappeared to.”

“I have to make sure everything’s secure before I can leave,” Jessie said. “If you guys don’t mind waiting about five minutes, maybe Steve could drive my car back to my condo. I still have an upset stomach and a massive headache. I don’t particularly feel like driving.”

“Fine by me,” Nick said, grinning at her. “And that means it’s fine by Steve. He’s at my mercy, since I have the wheels.”

After opening the door, Jessie went back to the vault. To her amazement, the papers she'd been working on earlier were no longer on the desk. How could that be? She went to the safe. It was unlocked, but the file folder she'd had out was where it belonged in the drawer. Obviously, she'd forgotten more than just the phone call to Nick. She'd also forgotten that she'd started cleaning up before she placed it.

Locking the safe, she initialed the form to indicate that she had, then locked the vault. After initialing that form, she left the offices, locked the outside door and signed out. When she turned around, Nick was gazing down at her, his concern evident in his expression.

"What?" she asked.

"Was everything all right back there?" he responded.

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"You look confused."

"I am, but I don't want to go into it now. Could we talk about it over pizza at my place?"

"All right. Come on, everybody," he said. Taking her hand, he started toward the elevator. "Let's vacate this place."

## FIVE

Opening the box on the table, Nick spoke casually while Jessie got him a beer and herself a glass of milk. “Okay, Jess. We’re home, and we have the pizza. Why were you so confused at the office?”

“I don’t know.” After setting the beer before him, she rounded the table and sat down. “Things just seemed disconnected. I really can’t remember calling you, Nick—not from the office, anyway. I must have been so sick that I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Not well enough to eat, but you go ahead. I’ll nurse my milk.”

Nick gazed at her over a slice of pizza that he held in both hands. His expression was so sorrowful that she knew exactly what he was thinking before he even began to question her.

“Jess,” he asked hesitantly, “did Nicky ...”

To spare him from having to complete his thought, she shook her head and interrupted him. “No. I wanted to nurse him, but he had to be fed intravenously.”

“You know, honey? Right now, I’m glad you can still read my mind. I wasn’t sure I could get all the words to that question out without sounding like a heel. I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

With a reassuring smile, she reached across the table and laid her hand on his arm. “Don’t ever be afraid to ask me about Nicky. He was our son, and you deserve to know everything you want to about him. In fact, now that I’ve finally told you, I almost regret not having told you sooner. And I only say almost because I still don’t regret having spared you the pain back then. Although, I suppose you still have the pain. It’s just delayed—and *maybe* not as deep as it would have been if you’d seen him in person.”

“Just don’t beat yourself up about it, okay? I’ll be fine. For now, though, I have just one more question about him. All the others can come when I think of them. It’s just that this one’s been nagging me all day.” When he paused to eat a bite of pizza, Jessie waited patiently. She knew he needed to voice the question to come to terms with everything. And, as she

suspected, he did as soon as he swallowed. “Did he die just because he was so premature? Or was there some congenital problem I should know about?”

“No, Nick, there was no congenital problem. He just didn’t have enough time to develop. I’d had two scares before his birth, and I did everything the doctor told me to, so I wouldn’t deliver early. Mom flew all the way to D.C. when he ordered complete bed rest the first time. There was just no way to stop his birth, Nick,” she explained as a tear slid down her cheek. “I don’t understand why, but God thought it was best to take Nicky home.”

Reaching across the table, Nick wiped away the tear with his thumb then changed the subject. “So, you had a major case of indigestion at work today. Do you know what might have caused it?”

She grimaced at the thought then smiled again. “Probably a combination of stress, extra spicy fajitas, and sour lemonade.”

“Damn, Jess!” he teased. “That would even make Steve sick, and *that* kid’s got an iron constitution. He can eat anything without it bothering him. So why didn’t you ask your boss to take you home? Why call me?”

“My boss?” she repeated, stunned that he would suggest such a thing. “Why would you ask that? I told you that I’d be the only person there today.”

“Are you as sure of that as you are that you didn’t call me?” he asked.

Jessie stared at him for several moments. Could somebody else have been in the office without her knowing it? She sighed and sipped on her milk. “I don’t see how anybody could have been there without me knowing it. There’s very limited access to the rooms, and nobody who has that access would leave me lying on the floor unconscious. They would call for an ambulance.”

“What about somebody who *doesn’t* have official access?”

“Come on, Nick,” she said with a giggle. “You’ve written too many spy stories. They’re starting to go to your head.”

“Why is that so far-fetched?”

“You don’t just wander into a secured office like that. Three people know the combination on the door—my boss, another military man, and me. And Gary changed it just the other day. Besides that, once the combination lock is open, you need a key to get in. So, it’s ludicrous to think that somebody was there without me knowing it.”

“I doubt there’s a lock that an expert couldn’t by-pass somehow.”

“Are you trying to scare me?” she asked, unable to hide her suspicious tone.

“Frankly,” he admitted, “yes. We tried to get your attention for five minutes before you came out of nowhere this afternoon.”

“For Pete’s sake, Nick!” she exclaimed in exasperation. “I didn’t think I needed to report in just to go to the bathroom and clean up.”

“You don’t. But I was frantic. I thought you were deathly ill, and I couldn’t get in. I’ve never felt so helpless in my life.”

Nick watched her unfalteringly as she wandered to the kitchen for some more milk. He knew her well enough to know that she was avoiding their conversation, and he knew that she was going to deny she was in serious trouble working in that office. Somehow, he had to convince her of the potential danger her working with top secret material created.

Returning to the dining room, she sank onto the chair beside his, lay her hand on his thigh, and smiled warmly as she said, “I appreciate your concern, Nick. I really do. But I’m a big girl now. I can take care of myself.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” he said flatly. “You’re not all that big, you know. You couldn’t fend off attackers as easily as somebody about five inches taller and twenty pounds heavier could.”

Jessie squeezed his thigh then rubbed it from the hem of his shorts to his knee using a slow, caressing motion. A mischievous glint came to her dark eyes, and a half-smile adorned her lips. This had always been her way of diverting the conversation, and it had unfailingly worked in the past. Tonight, though, he was determined not to let her dissuade him—if he could convince his body that he didn’t want her right then and there.

“In case you’ve forgotten last night,” she said in a seductive tone, “I could fend off any attackers I choose to. If I recall correctly, you ended up in the gravel, stunned beyond words for the first time in your life.”

Inhaling, Nick struggled to control his growing desire. Why was it that he could be with other women and restrain himself, but he found it so difficult to even be in the same room with Jessie? Was it because he still loved her? Or did he just have vivid memories of the night they’d created Nicky? Whatever it was wasn’t something he could control.

He inhaled four more times to stifle his arousal, then responded in his most fatherly tone. “Jessica Nelson, are you trying to seduce me out of this conversation?”

“Would I do something like that?” she asked.

“You sure as hell wouldn’t used to,” he returned, “but I’m not putting any bets on *what* you would do now. You’ve changed, Jess—for the better, but you have changed. I didn’t even

think you could get better. I thought you were already perfect.”

“Nobody’s perfect, Nick.” Jessie moved closer as she seductively massaged his thigh. Even though he knew that she was trying to take his mind off the topic, he couldn’t restrain his reaction to her actions, and his body continued to respond. Leaning over, she kissed him on the neck just under his ear. A violent shudder coursed through him, and she grinned as she asked, “Got a problem, Ramsdale?”

“Hell, yes,” he admitted. “A gorgeous lady is trying to drive me crazy while I’m eating.”

“You don’t want to be driven crazy?”

*Drive me anywhere you want to*, his mind screamed, *just not crazy with desire*. Determined to keep the topic where he wanted it, he said, “Not while I’m working on such an important project.”

“Eating pizza’s more important than I am?”

He couldn’t let her get to him. He couldn’t! “Damn it, Jess. I’m serious. I want you out of that office—for good. It’s too dangerous.”

As she scrambled to her feet, her fury showed in her narrowed, dark brown eyes. “Don’t you *ever* tell me what to do, Nicholas Ramsdale. If you do, I’ll go out of my way to not do it just to spite you. And don’t tell me what *not* to do, either, because the same thing applies in reverse.”

“Fine,” he snapped. “Stay in the damned office. Get your ass kicked. Get your head blown off. If you think I care in the least when you’re being this stubborn, ...”

“You do,” she finished for him. “And you know it.”

“That’s right,” he agreed, rising to stand before her. “I do. I won’t let the mother of my child be blown to bits by some maniacal bomber.”

“You’re the maniac!” she insisted. “You’ve written too many idiotic novels about stupid spies who think they can save the world from destruction.”

“And *you* read them—many times over from what I saw.”

“But I don’t let them go to my head. Why don’t you try something more realistic—like romance novels.”

“Romance novels!” He chuckled sarcastically. “For God’s sake, Jessie. You can’t believe those things are realistic.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said, bowing her head in embarrassment. “I don’t read them,



because I like spy novels." She shot her gaze back to Nick. "But that doesn't mean I consider them the Gospel truth, either. Fiction is fiction, no matter how you look at it."

"My fiction is based on fact. Every last word of it. And the fact is, you're in a dangerous job."

Jessie shook her head. "Would you drop it, Nick? I don't have a dangerous job."

"Listen to me, Jess," he said, tenderly grasping her shoulders. "I love you, so I worry about you. There's nothing you can do to stop it. It's a natural phenomenon."

"I wish you'd stop telling me that," she worded softly. "I'm engaged, betrothed, promised to another man."

"And I'm going to take you away from him."

The determination in his voice was so strong she couldn't deny that he would keep trying until he'd either failed or succeeded. But one question nagged at her until she finally had to have an answer. "Why can't you let me go on with my life, Nick? Why do you have to keep bringing up feelings that are years in the past?"

"Because those feelings are still very strong, which makes them very much in the present. Don't you see what you're doing? You're denying them again—just like you did eleven years ago—just like you did six years ago. There's a bond between us now, Jessie. Can't you understand that? Nicky changes everything."

"He changes nothing. And I'm not denying that bond. In fact, I *admit* that it's there. But, Nick, you *have* to get over this obsession of being with me. It just wouldn't work for us. We know each other too well. There's no mystery to our relationship."

"Right now," he said, turning his back on her, "there's plenty of mystery. And it all pertains to that damned job of yours. Hell, it pertains to that damned *fiancé* of yours."

Jessie studied him. How could he possibly connect Todd with her job? The two didn't even come close in comparing. She'd already told Nick that Todd had never asked her what she did for a living. So why did he bring them together? Come to think of it, why *hadn't* Todd asked her? Surely, it couldn't be because he already knew.

What a ludicrous thought! Maybe. Todd's voice had changed slightly when she told him what Nick did for a living, but he hadn't pumped her for more information. Could the reason be that he was afraid it would make her suspicious?

"Stop it!" she chided aloud. "That's crazy thinking."

“Why?” Nick asked as he turned to face her again.

She gazed up at him, confused. “Why what?”

“Why is my associating Hardy with your job such crazy thinking?”

“Because ... because ...” The blatant expression of concern in his green eyes caught her attention as he tenderly slid his fingers into her hair. His concern was starting to make her question Todd’s motives, but Nick had never given her any reasons behind his connection between Todd and her job. And why? Because there *were* no reasons other than Nick’s jealousy. And she couldn’t let that break up her engagement to a man she knew would be good for her.

To avoid directly answering his question, she replied, “He’s my fiancé, Nick. He loves me.”

“He says.”

“Why would he lie about something as serious as love?”

“To get information from you,” Nick replied.

Now Jessie was beginning to lose her patience. This conversation was becoming ludicrous. “You’re going overboard on this, Nick. Todd doesn’t even know what I do for a living. I already told you that he’s never even asked.”

“Don’t you think it’s odd that he hasn’t?”

“No.” She paused a moment. Maybe it was odd that he hadn’t asked. “Well, maybe—a little. But you don’t understand, Nick. He’s never asked me anything about my job. Why would he think he could get information from me if he doesn’t at least ask?”

“He could be biding his time, honey, waiting until you’re married before he gets you involved.”

“Involved in *what?*”

Nick groaned as he rubbed her cheekbones with his thumbs. “You’re still very naive, sweetheart, despite how much you’ve matured. That makes you vulnerable to all kinds of men who want to use you.”

She gazed up at him. A simple touch from Nick still dissolved her anger. A simple touch still melted her resolve to remain distant. Why did Nick always have this effect on her when other men didn’t? Why could Nick unfailingly turn her body into mush that he could spoon at will.

Determined to keep as much of her sanity as possible before he drained that from her with his touch as well, she said, "I can't believe Todd would use me, Nick. He's sweet and kind and generous. He's also very jealous of you."

"He'd better be," Nick declared. His expression took on a thoughtful quality that Jessie remembered vividly, despite the passing of years. "In fact, ..."

Without warning, he broke contact and wandered to the couch. Jessie followed and sat down beside him. Absently reaching into his shirt pocket, he withdrew the tape from his message machine and toyed with it. Jessie watched in silent curiosity.

She'd seen that look in his eyes before, and she knew what it meant. He was scheming again. There was no doubt in her mind. She'd lost count of the number of times he'd drifted into his thoughts when he was working on a novel plot.

Finally, unable to bear his open expression a moment longer, she observed, "You're planning something, aren't you. Only this time it's not a book plot. What are you up to?"

"Nothing." His eyes didn't leave the tape as he slid it between his fingers. "Yet."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"I'm just trying to divert the danger from you."

"For Pete's sake, Nick. I'm not in danger. When are you going to believe that?"

"When I can prove it." He shifted on the couch, turning so one leg was bent before him. Then he laid his arm across the back. "I need your cooperation this time."

Again, he didn't continue, and again she sensed what he was thinking. "Oh, no, Nick. I won't do it."

"Do what?" he asked. "I haven't even explained the plan I'm formulating."

"You don't need to. It's me here, remember? Jessie Nelson. You can't *fool* me. I know what you're thinking. I won't set Todd up for you. No way. If you want to set him up, I can't stop you, but I *won't* participate in your scheme."

"You don't even know what it is yet." Grinning seductively, he twisted one of her curls around his finger. "You might even enjoy what I have in mind."

"I don't care. I won't agree."

"Okay." Sitting back against the arm of the couch, he changed the subject. "So, how's your headache?"

She examined him suspiciously, sure that he was planning something else now. “Better. That was too easy. What are you up to?”

Nick grinned and shrugged his broad shoulders. “Nothing. You said you weren’t interested, and I won’t press you. Is lover-boy supposed to come over tonight? I wouldn’t want to be here if he shows up again. We had a bit of a disagreement last night.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call you accusing him of things then not telling him what those things are a disagreement.”

His bushy eyebrows shot up in surprise, but he replied nonchalantly. “Good point. I should probably go before he comes by—if he’s planning to.”

“As far as I know, he’s spending the night on Maui.”

“Now that’s my idea of good luck,” he said. “Let’s put the pizza away and see what’s on the tube. We’ll spend the evening acting like an old, married couple.”

Jessie bristled at the insinuation. “I am *not* going to sleep with you again, Nick. I’m engaged now.”

“Who said anything about sleeping together?”

“You’re the one talking about old, married couples.”

“That’s right,” he agreed, wandering to the dining room where the pizza still sat on the table. “Old, married couples don’t sleep with each other. If I’d wanted to insinuate that, I would have said that we’d spend the evening like a couple of newlyweds. So relax. Your fiancé won’t have a thing to worry about—unless, maybe, he shows up unexpectedly.”

“I still say you’re up to something,” she grumbled as she joined him and closed the box. After putting it in the refrigerator, she took his paper plate and dropped it into the garbage. Finally, she returned to the living room, where he was studying the *TV Guide*. “Find anything interesting?”

“Are you kidding?” he asked with a laugh. “We’re talking television here. Tell you what. Why don’t you change out of your work clothes while I go through your streaming services. Maybe we could watch a couple movies.”

“Okay,” she agreed, starting toward her bedroom. “But get comedies, would you? I don’t feel like anything heavy tonight.”

Jessie blew her nose while Nick pushed the button on the remote control. Putting it on the coffee table, he slid closer to her and draped his arm around her shoulders.

“You know, Jess,” he teased. “You’re the only woman I know who cries at comedies.”

“Can I help it if you picked out a romantic comedy?” she returned with a grin. “It had a happy ending.”

Nick chuckled. “You must go through a whole damned box of Kleenex if there’s a *sad* ending.”

“Always the comedian, aren’t you.”

“No way! I don’t want to make you cry.” Again, he twisted a lock of her hair around his finger, this time speaking in a deep, sexy tone. Leaning closer, he kissed her Band-Aid lightly. “Does your owie feel better now that Daddy kissed it?”

Determined to keep her distance, she scooted to the end of the sofa. “I know what you’re doing, Nick. And it’s not going to work. I still won’t go to bed with you.”

He followed her and put his arm around her again. “I don’t recall asking you to.” He kissed her again, this time on the cheek.

Jessie sighed in relief as Nick moved away from her. She wasn’t sure how much more of his seduction she could take. Her defenses were already starting to wear thin.

Why had she decided to put on a pair of jogging shorts and a tube top? She was wearing virtually nothing, and Nick was beginning to get amorous. Worse than that, she *liked* it. Despite her protests, despite her engagement, she wanted his seduction. But the worst thought was that she wanted him to break down her resolve!

Her eyes widened in amazement at her next thought. This was almost a repeat of an evening six years ago! What had she done by choosing those clothes? Had she subconsciously wanted to seduce him?

After finding a second movie to watch, Nick pushed the play button. Finally, he draped his arm around her bare shoulders and pulled her against him.

“One tear during this movie,” he warned lightly, “and I’ll *never* take you to the theater.”

Jessie read the title in shock. “*Friday the Thirteenth*? Nick, I told you nothing heavy.”

“I can’t think of anything funnier than a blood-and-guts horror movie.” Reaching over, he turned off the light on the end table next to her. “Gotta have the right atmosphere for one of these.”

Not five minutes into the movie, Nick began to toy with her collarbone. The yearning that he’d instilled in her years before returned in an instant. But she didn’t protest. She couldn’t, because her body had already quit listening to her mind. He moved her hair out of his way

with his free hand and kissed her neck. She shuddered involuntarily, shrugging her shoulder.

An unexpected knock startled Jessie. She jumped up, heading to answer the door. Nick stepped over the coffee table and swept her into his arms before she passed him.

Her gasp of surprise was cut short as his mouth covered hers in a hungry kiss that made her forget almost everything. She pushed his head away and whispered to him while the person knocked again. "That could be Todd."

"Tough," Nick returned. "I love you. I won't let him intrude on our time—not one second of it."

When he bent to kiss her again, she turned her head. "He has a key."

"It might not even be him. It might be somebody who doesn't have a key. And if it is, they'll go away."

He picked her up and knelt on the floor, laying her on the carpet. Lying down beside her, he draped his leg over hers. "I love you, Jess. Don't spoil this by answering the door."

He kissed her again, forcing his tongue into her mouth. His hand sought out her covered breast and massaged it. Desire exploded in her. Her heart beat faster; her lungs ached for more air. As he pulled down her top to expose her breasts, he continued to kiss her deeply.

Jessie pushed his knit shirt up and slid her hands enticingly up his ribs to his strong, muscular, hair-covered chest. Breaking the kiss, he stripped off his shirt then lay down atop her.

Her excitement increased when she felt his bare chest against her naked breasts. Grabbing his head, she drew it to her to kiss him again. Her tongue explored his mouth as it had six years ago. And like six years earlier, she was caught up in Nick, completely in his power. No matter what he wanted, she had no recourse but to give it to him.

He pulled his mouth from hers again, kissing his way over her chin and throat to her chest. Finally, he kissed her nipple. In an instant, her excitement grew even stronger than she'd thought possible, and she moaned his name heatedly. "Oh, Nick."

Then the door slammed open. Jessie looked toward it in shock, her fingers still tangled in Nick's soft curls. But Nick didn't stop. He delectably taunted her nipple while she stared, horrified, at Todd.

"What the hell's going on in here?" Todd demanded.

Nick kissed her nipple one more time then, pulling her top back into place, sat up beside her. "Hello, Hardy. I wondered if you'd show up again tonight."

“Shut up, Ramsdale,” Todd ordered. Jessie scrambled to her feet while he approached her. “I want an explanation, Jessica. And I want it now.”

“There is no explanation,” she said. “It just happened. We were watching movies, and things got out of hand.”

“Ramsdale probably planned for it to. He must know how vulnerable you are.”

“I am not!” she denied.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Nick said as he stood and slid his arm around her shoulders, “but you are. And there’s not a soul on earth who knows it better than I do. But I had no intention of taking this any further than a little petting. I want you to believe that.”

“I do, Nick,” she granted.

“You’re a damned liar!” Todd accused. “Can’t you see that, Jessie? The man’s a liar. He just wants to get you in bed. He’s got some sort of fantasy about you that he wants to fulfill.”

“My fantasy’s a damned sight more enjoyable for her than your fantasy.” Picking up his shirt, Nick slipped it on again then returned his glare to Todd. “At least, I have only *pleasant* experiences awaiting Jessie. That’s more than I can say for you.” Gazing down at her, he spoke in a near-whisper. “I’d better go, Jess. Remember, I love you.” He kissed her on the lips before he started to leave, stopping beside Todd. “As for you, Hardy. You’d better keep watching over your shoulder. You never know when I’ll show up. I’m not going to let you win.”

Nick strode out the door, closing it behind him while Todd and Jessie watched in stunned disbelief. Nick was after something. Jessie was sure of it. But what? Revenge because Todd was engaged to her? That wasn’t very likely, because it wasn’t Nick’s style—at least, it hadn’t been before. Maybe he’d changed as much as he claimed she had. And if he had, maybe he wasn’t as predictable as she’d thought.

## SIX

"I'm really sorry, Todd," she said. "I didn't expect things to go so far."

"So far!" Todd repeated. "What the hell does that mean? That you'd planned this all along—a little necking maybe, a little touchy-feely with your clothes still where they belonged?"

"You don't understand," she said. "Nick's going through a difficult time right now. When he saw our engagement in the paper, he wanted to see me. And *you'd* promised not to announce it until I gave my permission. The only reason I asked you to wait was so I could tell him in person. He also recently found out that he lost a son without even knowing that he had one. He *needs* a friend like me right now, Todd. I'm somebody he can talk to, somebody he can cry in front of without feeling ashamed."

"I suppose you were just comforting him," Todd added, his voice filled with bitterness.

"I was keeping him company, and things got out of hand."

"God, are you gullible! The man wants you, Jessie. And he's using every trick he can think of to get you. He's using you by telling you a sob story about some kid that doesn't even exist. Didn't you hear him threaten me? I told you that he'd done it last night, and tonight he turned around and proved it by threatening me in front of you."

To keep things from getting even more uncomfortable, Jessie ignored his remark about Nicky not existing. Technically, it was true. But in her heart, as well as in Nick's, their child did exist. If she wanted to keep Todd from becoming even more enraged, she should probably tell him about Nicky, tell him that Nick's child was also her own. But given the circumstances leading up to this conversation, that would probably cause more problems than clarity.

She just didn't want to tell Todd everything right now, because she wasn't sure how he



would react. Besides, she wasn't sure she *ever* wanted him to know, not so much because of Nick but because she just didn't feel that she could confide in Todd the way she did Nick.

To conceal her emotions concerning Nick and her son, Jessie replied, "I'll tell him that he'd better not do it again if he values our friendship."

"It isn't your friendship he wants."

"He's hurting, Todd," she explained as she wrapped her arms around him. "Give him time."

"Time for what?" Todd demanded, returning her embrace. "Time to take you away from me? Time to set me up for something? He threatened to destroy me, Jessie. You know what that means, don't you? It means that he'll destroy you, too. That's the only way it can be."

Jessie gazed into Todd's blue eyes, hoping to divert an extended argument. "Nick would never do anything to hurt me. I'll find out why he's been threatening you, then I'll calm him down and talk some sense into him. I'll let him know that I'm committed to you. He knows that I take my commitments seriously—probably more so than anybody else. Beneath all that bluster, he's a very compassionate man."

"I don't want you to talk to him. I want you to stay as far away from him as possible."

Jessie broke away from Todd and wandered to the patio overlooking the parking lot and the mountains. She didn't want to stay away from Nick, but she didn't know how to explain that to Todd. He wouldn't understand that, to this day, Nick was the best friend she'd ever had, and he certainly wouldn't understand that Nick was the father of her child. She hadn't even told Todd that she'd given birth.

In a way, she was glad that Nick knew the truth. Telling him about Nicky had been the best decision she'd ever made—and the worst! Nick had a right to know that he'd had a child, but something unexpected had overtaken her at Nicky's grave, something she couldn't explain.

When she and Nick had gone to the cemetery together, a powerful force had erupted within her, as surely as the volcanoes had erupted to form the Hawaiian Islands. Besides the sense of family that she'd expected, Jessie had felt as lush, as green, as alive as the Islands. And as beautiful as all the tropical flowers. Her heart was truly alive for the first time in six years. No, it was longer than that, but she couldn't quite remember when she'd been so happy.

From behind, Todd slid his arms around her and clasped his hands together at her waist. "Did Ramsdale really upset you this much, Jessie?"

"Heavens no," she answered. "He didn't upset me at all—not even a little bit."

“Are you saying that you *enjoyed* what he was doing to you?” Todd asked in amazement.

“I’m surprised you couldn’t tell,” she replied without thinking. “Nick’s a very good ...” She cut off her words when she realized what she was about to say.

Todd spun her to face him and held her shoulders roughly. Fire of anger blazed in his eyes as he questioned her. “A very good what? Lover? Is that what you were going to say?”

Jessie stared up at him, unable to respond. She’d never seen him react so violently; she’d never seen such uncontrolled rage in his eyes. He jerked her forward so viciously that her head snapped back.

Pain shot through her neck like a knife stabbing into the base of her skull. She wanted to scream, but fear blocked the exit from her throat. When she opened her mouth to try again, he spun her around and clamped his hand over it. As he dragged her back into her apartment, she glanced to the parking lot in the hope that Nick was there. But she didn’t see him, which meant that he hadn’t seen what happened.

*This isn’t happening*, she thought as he closed the patio door, still holding her head tightly against his chest. When she tried to free herself, her neck hurt even more. How would she get out of this mess?

He dragged her to the couch and pushed her onto it. Jessie scrambled to her feet and headed toward the phone. She picked up the handset and pushed the nine before he ripped it out of her hand. To her astonishment, the cord detached from the wall unit and dangled from the handset. Todd studied the situation a moment then wrapped the long cord around each hand twice. Now she wondered why she never liked cordless phones.

Fear gripped her like never before. Her heart pounded within her; her lungs ceased functioning. Instinctively, she backed away from him. But he inched after her, slowly, menacingly, toying with the cord in his hands.

“Tell me the truth, Jessie,” he ordered. “Did you sleep with him last night?”

“No,” she replied her voice barely audible even to her.

“Do you swear it—in the name of God?”

He had her now, and judging from the look in his eyes, he knew it. There was no way she would lie in the name of God. The deity of her life meant too much to her to blaspheme his name in such a manner.

“Yes,” she said. “I swear it in the name of God.”

But the anger in Todd was obviously too strong to be allayed. He continued to stalk her as she backed away from him. “I don’t believe you.”

"I couldn't swear in God's name if it weren't true," she proclaimed. "Surely, you know that after all the times we've been together."

Jessie bumped into the refrigerator and realized with a start that she'd backed through the kitchen. On the other side of the short wall was the door. All she had to do was slip around it and run out. But how could she without turning her back on him and giving him the opportunity to slip the cord around her neck? What was she thinking! If she wanted to live, she had to take the chance.

Bolting around the corner, she reached for the doorknob. Todd knocked her hand away with the handset. Pain shot through her wrist, but she refused to give in to either it or the pain in her neck. To protect her throat, she tucked her chin then dropped straight down. Twisting on the balls of her feet, she faced him as she stood up again.

Envisioning the living room in her mind, she backed toward it. There must be something in there that she could use as a weapon—a vase, a lamp, a book—something that would put her on even footing with her attacker. But she couldn't think of anything that she could use on the spur of the moment and with very little effort so as not to impede the surprise she hoped to gain.

"Think about what you're doing, Todd," she advised, hoping to reason with him.

"I *know* what I'm doing, honey," he proclaimed with a note of sarcasm in his voice. "I'm getting you to promise never to see Ramsdale again."

Behind Todd, the door opened. Jessie stared at it. Then Nick stepped into the doorway. He hadn't had time to go to his car and come back, so he had to have been nearby the whole time. She stifled the urge to scream out his name when, silhouetted by the hallway light, he nodded for her to agree.

"Whatever you want, Todd," she said, relieved that the scene was almost over.

"*Promise* me," he demanded.

"I promise. Now put down the phone."

"And lose my power? That wouldn't be very smart of me now, would it?"

"If you drop it, I won't press charges," she vowed, trying anything that might get Todd to reconsider his actions. "You know what will happen if the press gets wind of this. You'll be out of office so fast your head will spin."

"If this hits the news, I'll be back so fast ..."

Nick wrapped his arm around Todd's neck and pushed the smaller man's head forward forcefully. "Drop it, Hardy." When Todd didn't respond, Nick applied more pressure. "I told

you to drop it.”

Instead of doing so, Todd swung the handset, hitting Nick in the temple. Stunned, he relaxed his hold just long enough for Todd to escape. Nick’s angry voice cut the tension. “Damn you!”

Crying out Nick’s name as Todd rushed toward her, Jessie dropped to her knees. The cord in Todd’s hands came so close to capturing her that she heard it slice through the air above her head. Crawling through the nearly dark living room, she groped for anything hard. Her fingertips touched a small box on the coffee table, and she gripped it tightly.

A light flashed on, temporarily blinding her. As she closed her eyes against the brightness, she heard a thud. Somewhere in her darkness Todd uttered an expletive she’d never heard him use before. When she opened her eyes a moment later, Nick sat on Todd’s chest with both knees straddling her fiancé.

A few seconds later Nick yanked the phone cord with all his strength. It hurtled, handset first, directly toward Jessie’s head. She tried to duck out of the way, but the receiver hit her squarely on the cheekbone and bounced to the floor. Pain shot through her face, and she slapped her hand over her eye, too stunned by everything that had happened to do more than gasp in shock.

Across from her, Nick dragged Todd to his feet and held him by his shirt, demanding, “Apologize to her.”

“Not until I get the truth,” Todd said, panting hard. “Did you or did you not sleep with my fiancée last night?”

“I did not—not that it’s any of your damned business. Now apologize.”

“Why did you tell me that you did?”

“I told you that I’d slept with her, and that was the truth. But I did *not* say that I’d done it last night. Now if you don’t apologize this second, I’ll beat the hell out of you.”

“I’m sorry, Jessie,” Todd said. “I never should have let my jealousy get the better of me. It will never happen again.”

“You’re damned right it won’t,” Nick proclaimed as he pushed Todd toward the door, “because you won’t be seeing her again.”

Todd stumbled forward several steps before he regained his balance and faced Jessie. “I’ll call you tomorrow, honey. I hope you’ll be able to forgive me by then.”

“Get the hell out of here!” Nick roared at the already departing man. When the door closed behind Todd, Nick turned toward Jessie. “Don’t you dare forgive him, Jess. No man

should *ever* treat a woman like that. Not even a state senator.”

“Right now, I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she said, rising. Dizziness swept over her. Every inch of her body ached. “Except maybe collapse.”

He was at her side instantly, helping her to sit on the couch. Sinking down beside her, he drew her against him. It was then that she noticed the remote control in her hand. Apparently, Nick did, too, because he questioned her cheerfully. “You planning to watch the movie now?”

“What?” she asked. It felt good to be in his arms again, safe and warm. Like nobody could hurt her.

“You’re holding the remote control,” he explained.

She offered him a weak smile. “I grabbed it for protection.”

“What did you think you were going to do? Fast forward him to death?”

A giggle she didn’t know was in her burst forth as tears of relief stung her eyes. “Actually, I would rather have rewound him and tried for a new scene altogether.”

“I’ll bet you would have!” he said with a laugh. “How do you feel?”

She snuggled against him into a slightly more comfortable position. “Sorer than I’ve ever been in my life. But my neck is the worst.”

“From what I saw when I peeked in a while ago,” Nick said bitterly, “I’m not surprised. Your head really took a beating when he shook you like that. I’m surprised you didn’t have a concussion. I wanted to kill the bastard on the spot, but I had to wait for the right opportunity to keep you from getting hurt any worse than you already were.”

Not wanting to discuss the incident, Jessie laid her head on his shoulder and smiled up at him, desperate to relieve the renewed tension. “I was probably all concussed out from the knock I took on my head this afternoon. I was out for a good four and a half hours.”

“Why didn’t you say so before?” Nick asked in concern. “I should take you to the emergency room.”

“No!” she replied, frantic that he would do just that. “They’ll want to know what happened, and I can’t tell them. It would ruin Todd’s career.”

“How the hell can you give a damn about his career after what he just did?”

“*You* caused it,” she proclaimed as she pushed away from him. Facing him, she studied him for a few moments. Some of Todd’s words drifted back to her numbed brain. Todd had

claimed that Nick was out to destroy him, and it was painfully obvious that Todd was right.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you,” she said, hiding the irritation rising within her. “Somehow you knew he was coming over tonight, and you set him up to attack me so you could get him out of my life.”

His bright green eyes widened, and he gasped in horror at her words. “I would *never* do anything that I thought would endanger you. I’ll admit to setting us up, but it sure as hell wasn’t to get him to attack you. I wanted him to come after *me*. I wanted to get him off your back long enough to find out what he’s up to. And I sure as hell wouldn’t have left this apartment if I’d thought that he would go after you. I’d always planned to stick around and see how things went after he left.”

“You want to know how things went?” she asked, no longer able to control her rage. “He was trying to *kill* me. *That’s* how things went.”

“He was just threatening you, honey,” Nick said. “He probably didn’t mean a word of it. It’s my guess that he just wanted to scare you into leaving me, and I’ll bet he really is sorry.”

“Why do you think he acted like that, Nick? Because he wanted to threaten me? No! He was jealous—of *you*. And I don’t blame him. I blame *you*. You set up that scene, Nick, and I want to know exactly what you’re up to.”

“I’m trying to take you away from Hardy.” He grasped her left hand and studied the ring while he toyed with it. “It hurts to think that you would marry the likes of him. You won’t even give me—one of your oldest and best friends—a fighting chance. I know how you feel about commitments, honey, but sometimes commitments should be broken, especially when one party can’t trust the other.” He slipped the diamond off her finger and dropped it into his shirt pocket with the tape from his answering machine. “There. I’ve just broken your commitment for you.”

The fight drained from her in that instant, and she smiled at him. But she didn’t make even a slight gesture to get her ring back. She didn’t know why she was letting him get away with it, and she didn’t care. After what Todd had done, she felt no allegiance to him, anyway. Still, she owed him something since she was engaged to him.

“Taking off my engagement ring doesn’t change the fact that I’m engaged, Nick,” she reminded him.

“Maybe not, but it will be easier for you to tell him to take a flying leap off Diamond Head. You won’t have that glitter blinding you every time you move your hand.”

“You can’t keep my diamond forever, you know. Eventually, you’ll have to give it back.”

Bending forward, he kissed her softly on the lips then sat back again and pulled her to him. “True, but I’m holding onto it until I decide if I should give it back to you or Hardy.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“Okay?” he repeated suspiciously. “Just like that? You said this earlier, but now it’s my turn. That was too easy. What are you up to?”

“Like *you* said earlier, nothing. Only *I* mean it. I don’t have the energy to argue with you. I’ll tell you what I do have the energy for, though. A nice, hot whirlpool then bed.”

“That’s exactly what you need, too.”

“I wish Todd wasn’t so jealous,” she said to change the subject again.

“I still think there’s more to it than jealousy, but I’ll grant that tonight probably was. The man’s up to something, honey. I just don’t know how to prove it. When I do, though, all hell’s going to break loose. I hope you’ll heed my warning and be prepared.”

Jessie shook her head. “You really are turning into one of the heroes in your books. I’m telling you, Nick. My job has nothing to do with Todd. He’s just a very jealous person.”

“I wish I didn’t love you so much,” he said with a smile. “I probably wouldn’t be so hard-headed about Hardy if I didn’t.” He kissed her lightly again then pulled her to her feet. “Go on now, before I decide to make your whirlpool a twosome.” With a modest smile, she started from the room, but stopped and turned toward him when she heard Nick’s voice. “The clicker?”

“What?” she asked curiously.

“The remote control.” When he extended his hand in her direction, she glanced down to see that she still held it. “Fork it over so I can watch the movie.”

Giggling, Jessie tossed it to him then went into the bathroom to soak in the whirlpool tub.

Nick had just dozed off in the guest room when Jessie’s terrified scream woke him abruptly. Tossing back the covers, he raced to her bedroom, where she was sitting in bed. Her face was pale, even in the soft glow of moonlight that came through the open window. Trembling and visibly shaken, she clutched a pillow against her chest with both arms.

“Oh, my God!” he exclaimed as he rushed to sit beside her. Prying the pillow from her, he took her into his arms to comfort her. As he rocked her gently, he stroked her soft, wavy hair in a soothing motion. “It’s okay, Jess. I’m here. I’m not going to let anything hurt you.”

“Hold me, Nick,” she pleaded. “Don’t ever let me go.”

“Never, sweetheart,” he agreed in a near-whisper. “Never again for as long as we live. Do

you want to talk about your nightmare?"

"No. I just want you to hold me. Please. I don't want to talk. I just want to feel safe again."

"Whatever you want, sweetheart. Just try to go back to sleep, okay?"

"I can't sitting up. I hurt too much."

"Then we'll lie down."

With tender gentleness, Nick helped Jessie lie down again. Lying down beside her, he drew her to him and laid her head on his chest. For several minutes, they lay in that position as he rubbed her upper arm with a light touch that she could barely feel. But the pain in her body was too great for her to enjoy such intimacy. The sharp stabbing in her neck brought tears to her eyes that she had a difficult time restraining. Finally, unable to bear the torture a moment longer, she shifted against him.

"I can't sleep like this, either, Nick," she said as her tears proceeded to dampen her cheeks. "It hurts my neck too much."

"I'm sorry. Tell you what. You get comfortable, then I'll find a position where I can hold you."

Doubling over her pillow to support her head, Jessie lay on her side before Nick snuggled against her back. It was a provocative position, but Jessie knew that he would have no trouble controlling himself. She'd been hurt, and he wouldn't want to add to her pain.

In a way it was funny. She knew Nick better than any other person in her life—even after all these years. And she trusted him like she'd never trusted anybody else. But deep inside, she knew that she would never be able to marry him like he wanted. They were too much alike to get along well if they lived together.

A tear dripped off the bridge of her nose and landed on her pillow. What a shame that she couldn't spend the rest of her life with somebody she liked as much as she liked Nick. What a shame that she didn't feel like she could live with her son's father.

A sob escaped from her, and Nick's lips caressed her neck. His whispered words drifted to her ears. "Daddy kissed it, sweetheart. It will get better."

Another tear splashed to her pillow. He was so good to her; he always had been. Why couldn't she be as good to him? Why couldn't she learn to love him and repay all his kindness the way he deserved?

Before long, her trembling from the nightmare of Todd's attack dissipated, and she



drifted into a peaceful slumber.

But Nick lay awake for hours. Could he prove the allegations he'd heard rumored? Could he ease Jessie's pain without dragging her into Hardy's sordid past? Most importantly, could he convince her that the feelings she'd had for him all these years were called love?

## SEVEN

When the alarm went off the next morning, Jessie turned it off right away, so it wouldn't startle Nick. Behind her, he groaned and snuggled closer. She smiled at the thought that, in all the years they'd known each other, this was the first night they'd *slept* together. It warmed her throughout to wake in his arms, but she had to get up and get to work.

Laying her hand on his thigh, she shook him and said, "Nick. Time to wake up. I have to go to work."

"I don't for quite a while," he returned.

"You have work to do?" she asked in astonishment.

"Thanks to you, I have a roof over my head." He kissed her shoulder lightly. "But I still have to put food on the table. I have to do some research later."

The memory of their argument last night flashed across her mind, and she questioned him. "Aren't you even going to complain about my job?"

"What good would it do? You'll do what you want to, anyway." After giving her a brief hug, he rolled onto his stomach. "As long as you feel well enough—and you promise to be careful—I won't say anything. Just call me around dinnertime. Right now, I've *got* to get some sleep. I spent half the night worrying about the woman I love."

Jessie got out of bed and went into her bathroom to shower. She was still sore, but it wasn't as bad as the night before. There were deep bruises on her cheekbone and above her eye, as well as on her knees. Besides the bruises, her knees had nasty carpet burns on them. In the shower, she discovered how sensitive they were and decided to wear neither slacks nor pantyhose. She should probably make do with only eye makeup for a few days, too. Not only was there a cut on her forehead, there was also a small cut under the opposite eye. She must have been in more of a daze than she thought last night if she hadn't noticed it then.

But the most painful injury was still her neck. How would she ever spend the day hunched over a desk in search of that missing document? That wasn't even taking into consideration the performance of her regular duties.

Bracing herself for a long, exhausting day, Jessie dressed in a short, brightly flowered muumuu with a pink background. She didn't want to move her neck, much less contort it while she blow-dried and styled her hair, so she left it to dry naturally. After a large glass of chocolate milk, she made a pot of coffee for Nick and left the house.

On her way to work, she realized that Nick had almost a complete change of heart concerning her job. Last night he'd practically demanded that she quit, yet that morning he accepted it—and it wasn't a grudging acceptance. He'd just wanted her to be careful. Why? she wondered as she parked her car. Was he up to something again?

Without paying attention to what she was doing, she locked her car and went into the building. The people she passed stared at her curiously, but she paid only enough attention to know that they noticed her injuries. Her thoughts were centered on Nick.

Why had he carried that tape with him all evening? Why even take it out of his recorder? He'd shown it to her and said it was proof that she'd called him. But why would he need proof? And why would he play with it while he was so deep in thought? Unless, ...

Something was on the tape that Nick hadn't told her about. Maybe it had something to do with why he thought her job was so dangerous. It might even explain why he'd wondered about her boss not driving her home. Maybe he'd heard voices other than hers on the tape. The nerve of him to keep something like that from her!

She would have to confront him about it when she called him. But would he tell her what he was hiding? Probably not. Somehow, she had to get that tape and listen to it.

But getting her hands on it wouldn't be easy. Nick had been awfully protective of that tape, and she hadn't even asked to see it. Besides, even if she did ask to hear it now, he probably wouldn't let her. After their confrontation last night, he would probably keep any information on it a secret from her until he got whatever proof he felt he needed.

That led to only one conclusion. If she wanted to hear Nick's tape, she had to steal it.

Jessie pressed the button by the door then pushed the door open when a buzzer sounded. Entering the office, she greeted the receptionist. "Morning, Rachel."

"My God, Jessie!" exclaimed the young woman with dark red hair sitting behind the desk. "What happened to you?"

"Let's just say that yesterday wasn't one of my better days," Jessie replied as she sank into a chair in the corner. "Man! I didn't think I was going to be this sore today. Just moving is a real effort."

"Maybe you should go home."

Jessie flapped her hand as though shooing away a fly. "There's nothing to do there,

anyway. Besides, I have to find that document.”

“Are you sure? You don’t look very good.”

“I like you, too,” Jessie quipped as she rubbed her neck.

“What happened, anyway?” Rachel asked.

“I got sick here yesterday,” Jessie explained with a grimace. “I passed out and hit my head. Then when I got home, I had a run-in with the stairs.” Jessie wasn’t sure where that excuse had come from, but she decided to stick with it for now.

“The stairs! Jessie, you live on the tenth floor. Surely, you didn’t try to walk that after you’d fainted.”

Jessie had never been good at lying, and her slip proved it. There must be some explanation for her to have been on the stairs. “I went to see if my friend on the eighth floor had any aspirin for my headache.”

“When are you going to learn that there are times when you need the elevator? Like when you’re sick.”

“Maybe after last night.” Pushing herself up with a groan, Jessie wandered toward the hallway, down which her office was located. “I’ll talk to you again later. Right now, I have a ton of stuff to do.”

She’d barely put her purse in the bottom drawer when Gary stopped in the doorway. “Morning, Jessie. How are you th...” He stopped instantly when she looked up at him. “Good Lord! What happened to you?”

“Maybe I should make a sign and hang it around my neck,” she complained. “I fell down some stairs, all right?”

“That fall bruised more than your face,” he returned with a grin. “It bruised your disposition, too. What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing.” She examined him silently while he sat down in the chair beside her desk. Maybe she wouldn’t need to steal the tape from Nick after all. “Were you here at the office yesterday afternoon?”

“Me? No, of course not. Why?”

“Just curious.”

“I thought *you* were going to be here.”

"I was."

"Then why ask if *I* was here?" A suspicious expression came to his dark blue eyes. "Did those injuries really come from a fall? Or did something happen while you were working yesterday?"

"Something happened, all right. I got sick as a dog. I passed out and hit my head. I don't know for sure how long I was out, but I finally came to about four-thirty."

"Then you should have *known* I wasn't here. I wouldn't leave you like that. I would have taken you to the hospital."

"That's what I told Nick, but ..."

When she stopped mid-sentence, his eyes narrowed. His brows furrowed in suspicious concern. "Nick Ramsdale? The man you were telling me about Saturday?"

"Yes." Deciding to bait Gary, Jessie continued. "He said I'd called him to pick me up, but he couldn't understand why I didn't just have you take me home. And he kept waving a tape in front of me. Said it was proof of my call."

"He felt he needed to prove that you'd called him? Why?"

"I didn't remember making the call. I guess he felt he needed to remind me." She shrugged and grimaced at the pain that shot through her neck. She needed to remember that she was so sore, although she couldn't very well forget it when she was reminded every time she moved. After a heavy sigh, she admitted, "Unfortunately, it didn't work. To this minute, I have no recollection of talking to him on the phone."

"If he had a tape, you probably talked to an answering machine."

"I don't even remember doing *that*."

"So why was he waving the tape at you?"

"Darned if I know. I don't even know why he didn't leave it on his machine. The only thing I can figure is that he wanted to keep it for some reason. And I think it had something to do with him asking me about you not taking me home."

Gary wrung his hands and began to pace. Jessie's suspicion shot to the surface in that instant. As far as she knew, Gary had never been one to act nervously. At least, he never had when she was around. But he was acting nervous now, and if he was acting nervous, something was up with him, too. Then he closed her office door.

Oh, no! she thought frantically. Now she was going to have to fight him off like she had Todd, and she didn't think she had the stamina for another encounter like that. What had she

gotten herself into by telling him what she had? Her eyes widened in horror when he approached her desk again.

Stopping short, Gary stared at her suspiciously. “What’s the matter, Jessie? You look like you’re going to be attacked—again.”

She fought to control the hysteria building in her by gripping the arms of her chair. How had he known that she’d been attacked? Had he done something to her the day before? Is that why she couldn’t remember calling Nick? Had the injury on her head come from Gary and not a desk? If only she could learn to keep her mouth shut when she should!

Wait a minute! Why was she panicking? Gary was her boss, and he had every reason to be in that office—whether she knew he was there or not. She was just overreacting because Nick was so paranoid about her working with top secret material. Not to mention, she couldn’t forget Todd’s assault.

“Is that what happened to you, Jessie?” he asked, his voice taking on a fatherly concern. “Did somebody get in here and attack you yesterday?”

“No,” she replied in a cracking voice. “As far as I know, I was alone.”

“Damn it, Jessie,” he said, slamming his fist on her desk. “I told you not to come here alone. I told you to wait until somebody else was here, too. But no! You had to play the independent, *stubborn* woman and find that missing document. I told you that I know you couldn’t have taken it. What else do you want from me?”

“The document,” she proclaimed. “And stop hitting the desk. I have a headache.”

“Then go home. You don’t look well, anyway.”

“That’s because I’m not wearing makeup. I didn’t want my cuts to get infected. I’ll probably look this bad until the scabs come off, too, because that’s when I’ll wear makeup again.”

“I still say you should go home.”

“And I still say I’m staying,” she insisted. “I want to find that document, Gary. I *have* to clear my name. Can’t you understand that?”

“Okay,” he agreed. “You can stay. But if you don’t feel better by noon, I’ll *take* you home. Is that clear?”

“Too. If you don’t mind, I want to get to work.”

“One more thing. Did your friend say anything about hearing voices on that tape? Is that why he was waving it in front of you?”

Jessie forced herself to remain calm. She didn't like the sound of his voice, but his questions were perfectly natural under the circumstances. She couldn't overreact to Gary's interrogation just because Nick was acting irrationally where her job was concerned. Steeling herself for even more questions, she answered with only slight irritation in her voice. "I don't know why. He wouldn't say, and I didn't ask."

"Jessie Nelson," he said paternally.

"Honest," she replied. "I don't know what was on the tape. I don't even know if it had *my* voice on it—let alone others. The thing could have been a blank one that he was using to prove a point." She stopped again when she noticed his suspicious expression. "And no, I don't know what point it could be. All I know is that he doesn't like me working here."

"Why not?"

"He thinks it's a dangerous job," she explained with another casual shrug. "I tried to explain that it wasn't, but he wouldn't listen."

"I told you when I hired you that the potential was there," he reminded her. "Holding a top-secret clearance puts you on a number of subversive lists. Why would you deny it?"

"Because of Nick. He's a spy novelist, and he's letting all the stuff he writes go to his head. I told him that, too. Could we just drop this?"

"Absolutely not. If there was somebody in here with you, I have ..."

"But there *wasn't*. I would have heard him if there had been. Let's just get to work."

"In a minute. How can I get in touch with Ramsdale? I want to hear that tape."

Jessie rose stiffly and wandered around her desk. "He's in the phone book. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to finish what I started yesterday."

Without stopping, she left her office. She didn't like being behind that closed door with Gary. He was asking too many questions, and she didn't want to say more than she already had. As Nick had pointed out, she wasn't very big. She wasn't sure she could handle Gary any better than she had Todd.

She sighed as she entered the vault. If nothing else, the disagreement she'd had with Todd had taught her one thing. Nick was right. She might not be able to take care of herself if it came down to that. As she pulled the file from the day before out of the safe filing cabinet, she recalled that she'd managed to dodge Todd several times before Nick came to her rescue.

But those last few were the operative words: Nick came to her rescue. He'd saved her from possible death, although she doubted Todd would have gone that far. But Nick had proven that it was likely she could never fend off the full-fledged attack of any man who felt

he had to silence her.

Trying to free her mind of the terrifying event, Jessie took the folder back to her office and got out her log. Now to check the paperwork in the file.

After a half an hour of meticulous checking, Jessie sat back in shock. One of the documents in that file was missing, too. She had logged it in, and now it was gone. Just like the other one! How had it happened? In the process of trying to find one piece of top secret material, she'd lost a second. How many others were there? And would all of them have her signature on the log sheet? After all, she wasn't the only one who logged in the classified material. So did Blaine Cooper, the ranking NCO.

If she hadn't been in trouble before, she was now. That made two top secret documents that had disappeared in one week—and *she* had handled both of them. *She* was ultimately the responsible individual.

A sudden, blinding headache consumed her. Crossing her arms on the papers covering her desk, she laid her head on them. It was no wonder her headache increased so unexpectedly. The stress was almost more than she could bear. With an unexpected idea, she got up and went to the entry office.

"Rachel," she said softly from the doorway, "I have a terrible headache. I'm going to lock my door and take a nap before I go home. Would you make sure I'm not disturbed?"

"Maybe I should drive you home."

"That won't be necessary. I had a rough night last night. I'm sure all I need is a little sleep. After I get that, I'll be able to drive."

"If you're sure," Rachel said.

Behind her locked office door, Jessie searched the file again. That document was definitely gone. She picked up the phone and dialed her home number. It rang several times before her answering machine picked up. Nick was probably already gone, anyway, so she hung up. She hadn't thought of it before, but she needed to get his cell phone number. That way she could get hold of him no matter where he was.

She leafed through the papers again, but nothing had changed—not that she'd expected it to. She called home again in case he'd just been in the shower, but Nick still didn't answer.

Jessie laid her head down again. If only she could remember what she'd done with the document. With *both* documents. Then another thought came to her. What if her memory loss concerning the documents was related to her not remembering her call to Nick? Probably not, considering she'd been so sick yesterday afternoon.

Besides, he could have said that to get information by baiting her with the tape—just like



she had baited Gary. Why had she done that, anyway? Gary was in charge of the office. He was perfectly within his rights to be suspicious of Nick's actions. He had every right to know what was on the tape.

Still, that didn't stop her suspicions concerning Colonel Garver. He wouldn't be the first officer to pass military secrets to the enemy. Unfortunately, the same could be said for her. When the authorities found out about this and questioned her, she would have to be honest. She simply couldn't remember anything about the documents once she'd logged them in.

Jessie tried dialing home again but received no answer. She tried Nick's number. Again, no answer. This time not even the answering machine came on. Where was he, anyway? Maybe if she could track him down, ... Taking the phone book from her drawer, she looked up Steve's number and dialed it. On the third ring, a woman answered.

"Hello," Jessie returned. "Is Steve there?"

"Just a minute."

In seconds, Steve came on the line. "Hello?"

"Steve? It's Jessie Nelson. Do you know where Nick went today?"

"Sorry. He just said something about some suspicious character he wanted to check up on."

So that was it! Nick was trying to find some dirt on Todd. There could be no other explanation. But what kind of dirt? "He didn't tell you anything else, did he?"

"Nothing—except that you got hurt last night. How are you feeling?"

"I've been better." She paused momentarily to indicate that she was changing the subject. "Would you do me a huge favor? Would you see if you can track him down? It's really important that I talk to him, and he didn't turn on his answering machine this morning."

"All right, but I'm not sure where to look."

"He's an author. Start with the library."

"Why don't you do it?"

"I shouldn't even be making *this* phone call from my office. I'll be home around twelve-thirty. You can tell him to call me there if you get hold of him." She paused a moment, not really satisfied with her instructions. "On second thought, have him *meet* me there. Only call if you can't get hold of him."

"Will do."

“Thanks a lot, Steve.”

Once more Jessie laid her head on her arms. Now for that nap she’d told Rachel she was taking.

When Jessie woke up, it was five minutes past twelve. She had just enough time to get home and meet Nick. Going to Gary’s office, she discovered that he was gone, so she went to tell Blaine Cooper. He wasn’t in, either. And neither was Rachel or Gary’s secretary.

After locking the file folder and papers in her desk, Jessie left and locked her office door again. Such an act was totally foreign to her. Normally, she put everything away, but for some reason she couldn’t explain, she felt it was better this way today. After writing a note, she taped it to Rachel’s phone then left.

She searched the parking lot where she’d thought she’d parked, but her car wasn’t there. That was odd. She was sure she’d parked in that section. Maybe she’d just forgotten because of her headache. She looked some more but couldn’t find her Mazda. Completely confused, she went back into the building and called the post security police.

“Is there a problem, ma’am?” the man who answered the phone asked.

“Yes,” she replied as anxiety engulfed her. “I can’t find my car. I left it in the lot this morning, but it’s gone. Apparently, it’s been stolen.”

“Where are you now?” Jessie gave him the building number, floor, and the name of her office. “All right. Somebody will be there in a few minutes.”

As she was hanging up, Rachel returned from lunch, followed almost immediately by Blaine and Gary. Embarrassed to tell them what had happened, Jessie explained that she was leaving for the day. Then she went outside the secured offices to await the policeman.

To Jessie’s embarrassment, they located her car two rows closer to the building than she’d thought she’d parked. After thanking the officer, she got into her Mazda, noting that the door had been unlocked. But she didn’t dare say anything. If she did, the officer would think she was a real loony, ready to be carted off to the nearest bin. He already had evidence of her memory lapses. She didn’t need to give more credence to her problem in case there was a formal investigation into the missing documents.

## EIGHT

Jessie paced her condo for three hours. Where was Nick, anyway? Why hadn't he come like she'd asked? He could have at least called. Surely, Steve had gotten hold of him or Steve would have called her like she'd asked. At least, she'd thought he would. So many years had passed, she couldn't be as sure about Steve's actions as she was about Nick's.

A knock on her door startled her. After a moment of hesitation, she rushed to answer it, happily calling Nick's name. Instead of finding Nick outside her door, Todd stood in the hall with a dozen white roses.

Disappointed that it wasn't Nick, she questioned Todd angrily. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to apologize," he explained as he handed her the flowers. "I even brought white roses as a symbol of truce. Can we talk?"

Deep in her heart, she knew she should agree, but after last night, she didn't particularly want to be alone with him. The memory of his assault was too fresh to even consider being alone with him.

"Thanks for the roses, Todd," she said after a few seconds of silence, "but I'm not ready to talk to you. You terrorized me last night, and I can't forget that it happened as easily as you seem to think. At the moment, I'm not even sure I can forgive it."

"Please let me explain, Jessie," he begged. "Maybe then you can understand what came over me."

She didn't want to do this. She didn't want to so much as *see* him right now. But he owed her an explanation, and the only way she would get it was by letting him have his say.

"All right," she agreed as she stepped back to let him in. "But you only have five minutes, and I'm *not* closing the door."

"Completely understandable."

Ignoring him, Jessie stalked into the kitchen and took a vase from her cupboard. The entire time, she was aware of Todd's presence as she put water then the flowers into the

vase.

“You know I never got married,” he said as she went about her chore, “but I never told you why. I was engaged to a very young lady. She was nineteen, beautiful, sexy, funny, smart—everything I’d been looking for. We even started living together. Anyway, I’d been away on business. I came home early and caught her in bed with another man. I flew into a rage then, too. But *they* were actually making love.”

Jessie took the flowers to the living room and set them on the coffee table. When she turned around to go back to the kitchen, Todd was right behind her. Panic flooded through her, and she backed away from him two steps. “I don’t want to hear this, Todd.”

“I just want to explain why I went off the deep end last night. When I saw you and Ramsdale ...”

“If you hadn’t come into my home uninvited, you wouldn’t have seen *anything*. But no,” she said accusingly, “you just barged in. You invaded my privacy. You forced my best friend to leave. You had the unmitigated gall to assault me. And you come back today expecting me to forgive and forget? I don’t know how you can even *think* that I’d want to, especially this soon.”

“I’m trying to apologize, honey,” he returned, taking her left hand in his. When he moved to toy with the diamond ring on her finger and discovered it gone, he shot his startled gaze to her face. “Where’s my ring? Why did you take it off?”

Jerking her hand from his gentle grasp, she glared at him. The very last thing she wanted right now was for him to touch her. It sent a shocking volt of revulsion through her that she couldn’t deny. But she kept her voice even as she replied, “I can’t think straight when it sparkles in my eyes every time I move my hand. Can’t you understand how confused I am?”

“*I’m* the one who’s confused. You were making out with another man—and *liking* it, for God’s sake.”

“Of course, I liked it. Nick was gentle and kind. He didn’t assault me like you did. He didn’t threaten to strangle me. He showed me tenderness and love last night, Todd—which is more than I can say for you. All *you* showed me was violence and fear. How can you expect me to keep wearing your ring after that?”

“Are you saying that you want to break our engagement?”

“I don’t know what I want right now,” she admitted. “I made a commitment to you and taking off your ring doesn’t change that. What happened doesn’t change that feeling so quickly, either. But you seriously damaged our relationship last night. I don’t trust you, and you can hardly blame me.”

“What about my trust in you?” he demanded. “For God’s sake, Jessie! I found you in

another man's arms. I can't pretend it didn't happen any more than you can pretend that I didn't lose control."

"I don't expect you to. That's one reason I'm so surprised that you came by today. I didn't expect to see you for quite a while."

"I told you that I'd call."

"*Call*," she returned, "not show up unannounced. Now it's time for you to go."

"But my five minutes aren't up yet."

"Maybe not, but I'm not comfortable being alone with you. I'm afraid I'll say something that will make you mad again. And quite frankly, I don't have the energy—or the mobility—to fight you off again. Now either you get out, or I'll start screaming. Just the attention from that ought to put your U.S. Senate career plans on hold for quite a while."

"All right," he hastily agreed, "I'll leave. But first I want to know what happened at the office today. Gary called me at work and said that you weren't well. Some cop was worried about you not being able to find your car and reported it to Gary. Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay," she said. "I'm still shaken from last night. Now get out of here."

"Okay, okay. But I'll be back, Jessie. I swear I will."

"Just call before you come, because next time I might not let you in. I wouldn't want you to waste your time coming here just to find out that I still don't feel comfortable around you."

As soon as Todd was out the door, Jessie closed it and turned the dead bolt lock. Then she collapsed back against it. That was close. She'd almost lost control, but she'd made it through their conversation. And she was relatively proud of herself for not letting her inner fear show.

"I'm really proud of the way you handled that, Jess," Nick praised as he rounded the kitchen corner.

"Nick!" After giving him a tight, welcoming hug, she grabbed his wrist and led him into the living room. They sat down on the couch, and Nick draped his arm around her shoulders. She snuggled against him, admitting, "I thought you'd *never* get here. Where have you been?"

"Checking out a lead." He kissed her briefly then questioned her in concern. "Steve said you sounded like this was an emergency. What's wrong?"

"I couldn't find my car," she explained, cringing at the thought of her mistake. "I wanted to come home, but my car wasn't where I thought I'd left it. I looked and looked, but I couldn't find it, so I went back to the office and called security. The officer and I found it a couple rows

from where I thought it was.”

“That doesn’t sound too serious.”

“That alone doesn’t. But when you add up everything else that’s been ...” Jessie paused. This was the first time she’d considered this, and her thoughts startled her. She was probably overreacting, but saying the words aloud to Nick would probably clear her mind, as well as explain what she suddenly suspected. “Well, some *very* strange things have been happening lately. I lost that document, you know. And then yesterday I got sick at work and passed out. I don’t remember calling you, but you insist that I did. Today I found out that another document is missing—from the folder I was checking when I got sick.”

Nick released gasp of shock, and Jessie smiled, relieved that he’d responded in that manner. Obviously, he didn’t like what she was saying any better than she did.

“It sounds awful, doesn’t it,” she agreed. “That’s not the end of it, either. I told Gary about you asking why he didn’t take me home yesterday. And boy, did he get suspicious! He asked all kinds of questions about you. And he started pacing—like he was really nervous about something.”

“What kind of questions did he ask?”

“I don’t remember for sure—just like I don’t remember what I did with those documents, like I don’t remember calling you. I remember he sounded suspicious, though. And I can’t understand why I didn’t remember where I parked my car at work. I’ve never done that before. The policeman and I found it just two rows away from where I’d parked it! I’d already checked that row, too. The way I see it two things could have happened. I just couldn’t find it—or I didn’t recognize it.”

She pushed away from him and grasped his forearm, gazing at him with troubled brown eyes. Nick stared back at her, startled by her reaction. But the panic in her voice and the passion in her words made his heart race with rage over what was happening to her.

“All of a sudden, I’m scared, Nick. What if these lapses of memory are black-outs? What if I have a second personality that’s stealing military secrets and selling them to the Soviets?”

Unable to stop himself, Nick laughed. It was a natural reaction that always happened when he was nervous about something as serious as what Jessie suggested. But when he saw her distressed expression, he toned his laughter down to a chuckle and apologized. He could only hope that she believed his words—because he sure as hell didn’t, not completely, anyway.

“I’m sorry, Jess,” he said, “but you’ve got to admit that’s a ludicrous idea. You only have one personality, sweetheart. And the only black-out you’ve had was when you hit your head.”

"Then explain my car," she demanded.

"You've had a lot on your mind lately. Maybe somebody asked to borrow it and you forgot that you let them."

"My keys were in my hand when I left the office."

Nick didn't like hearing that at all. If she had her keys and her car had been missing, that meant somebody else had her keys, too. To keep her from overreacting, he replied as calmly as he could. "Anybody could have been using your car."

"Are you referring to the people in my office?" she asked in amazement. "Come on, Nick. If you believe that, you really *have* let those books you write go to your head. Those people wouldn't have top secret clearances if they would do something like that. Taking somebody's car without their permission is grand larceny, not a misdemeanor. And people who commit felonies aren't given clearances."

"All right," he granted. "You've got a valid point. But that doesn't mean you have dual personalities. Somebody could be gaslighting you."

"Gaslighting me?" she explained in shock. "Why would anybody want me to think I'm going crazy?"

"To force you into confessing to a crime you didn't commit."

Jessie wandered to the patio, so Nick joined her and let his gaze follow hers. In the distance he could see the mountains that she always claimed gave her solace. Maybe if he took her for a drive in them it would help.

A moment after she stopped at the side railing, Nick slid his arms around her shoulders and hugged her. She laid her hands on his arms. With a contented sigh, she laid her head back on his chest. In an instant, joy swept through him. He could tell by the way she was acting that she felt safe with him, just like in old times.

Then her skeptical voice drifted to his ears. "I really do prefer your theory, Nick, but how can you be sure? For all you know, I could be covering up any black-outs I've had by telling you that I fainted and hit my head."

Nick rubbed her shoulders caressingly and kissed her hair. "The only covering up you did was that cut on your forehead with a Band-Aid."

"I could have faked it."

"You've never *faked* anything, Jess." Turning her to face him, he toyed with a lock of her dark red hair silently for several seconds. What was it Steve had told him? If he wanted a whirlwind romance, he couldn't let Jessie forget the good times they'd had for even a

moment. But this wasn't the opportune time to bring up the past. Then again, if he worded it right, it might help to relieve some of her tension. When he continued, he spoke in a low, seductive tone. "In fact, the most important thing in our relationship, something that you could easily have faked, was very real. You told me so yourself."

"That was six years ago, Nick. I'm talking about the present."

"You're talking nonsense, sweetheart—fiction," he said as he drew her close again.

Jessie's heart felt as if someone had torn it in two. She wanted Nick to be with her right now, but he'd been the cause of her problems with Todd. And what if Todd was watching from the parking lot? He would never forgive her; he would never want to marry her. But did she really want him to anymore?

Nick might have saved her from a man who would become increasingly violent—not that threatening to strangle her wasn't violent enough. She hadn't even protested when Nick had taken off her ring and put it in his pocket. She'd accepted it without a single question or complaint. Any other time, she would have been furious with him.

And Nick's presence was so reassuring. Every time he held her, she felt safe, comfortable—and loved. She also felt sane again, when the rest of the time she could swear that her sanity was slipping away.

Not wanting to break the serenity surrounding her, she asked, "Nick? Do you still have the tape you told me had my call on it?"

"Of course. Why?"

"I want to hear it. I need to know that I really did call you. I need to know that I'm not losing my mind."

"I can't play it for you, honey. Not yet, anyway."

"Why not?" she asked, even though she was afraid of the answer. "Did I say something incriminating?"

"Of course not."

"Then why can't I hear it?"

"There's more to it than just a phone call."

"What about Gary? Would you let him listen to it? He already told me that he wants to."



“Who’s Gary?”

“My boss,” she explained. “He said he was going to try to call you.”

He held her at arms’ length to study her expression in the hope of finding a hint of the meaning behind her words. All he saw in her dark eyes, however, was the same innocence that he’d seen the first day of class twelve years earlier. It was the same look of innocence that he’d seen the night of their first date. He’d taken her and Steve to Joe’s house, where he’d been living until Joe returned from a business trip, for a picnic on the beach. It was the same look of innocence that she’d had when he’d carried her to bed six years ago. And it was that same look of innocence that he’d fallen hopelessly in love with, because it wasn’t just a look. Jessica Nelson truly was innocent, even after her marriage.

“I love you, Jess,” he whispered. Unable to restrain his passion, he bent over her and captured her lips with his.

Jessie wanted to get involved in his kiss. Oh, how she wanted to! But she couldn’t wrest her mind from her problems this time. She needed Nick as she never had before, yet she needed him in a different way.

Even as he drew her into his secure embrace again, she tried to give herself over to his passion. As his tongue entered her mouth to clash with hers, she longed to give him what he wanted. But her body wouldn’t listen to either her mind or her heart, like it hadn’t since the night they reunited.

Nick was the only man who had ever made her want more than just necking. Still, she couldn’t give herself to him. Why not? Was she afraid of being with him for the rest of her life? Was she afraid she would lose him like she had Joe? Or was there something more behind her fear?

While Nick kissed her, an unexpected thought came to Jessie. He had come back into her life only days after she’d lost that first document. Could he be involved? He knew an awful lot about espionage. Maybe he’d decided to use her innocence to get top secret information.

What a ridiculous notion! Nick Ramsdale was an honorable man. At least, he had been eleven years ago. But six years ago, he’d shown her exactly how forceful he could be. Six years ago, he’d used her innocence, and she’d had a child to remind her of it. He could be using her naiveté again.

Pushing away, she gazed up at him with tears in her eyes. “No! I won’t let you do it.”

He stared at her in shock, unable to understand her reaction. He knew he wasn't exciting her as he had before, but he'd thought she would come around soon. Yet the tone of her voice told him that she wasn't talking about him kissing her. Curious, he questioned her slowly. "Won't let me do what?"

"Use me," she declared. "I won't let you do it."

"I don't want to use you, Jess." Even though he longed to reach out and comfort her, he couldn't bring himself to do it. "I want to love you, and that's all I've been doing."

"No. You've been using me. Everybody uses me, because I'm too stupid to see it before it's too late." Drawing in a deep breath, she vowed, "I'm making a new rule in my life. I'm never going to trust anybody again—not for the rest of my life."

"You're *not* stupid. Naive maybe, but not stupid. And I *don't* want to use you. I don't even understand how you could suggest it. You know me better than that. If I were a user, I never would have given you up so easily—twice. I would have fought to get everything out of you that I could."

"You did!" she exclaimed. "And Nicky's proof."

His heart broke. She *couldn't* believe his love was so close to the surface that he didn't hurt over the loss of their child. "Don't bring Nicky into this, Jess. He has nothing to do with what's bothering you. You're just using him to hurt me. And you're succeeding, because it hurts like hell."

Jessie watched a tear slide down Nick's cheek. He was right. Even if it hadn't been intentional, she had used their son to hurt him. How could she have done such a thing? She'd never been a vicious person, yet she had just inflicted the most painful injury to a person that she could think of. What was happening to her? She was turning into somebody she didn't even know.

"Oh, Nick!" she cried out, hugging him. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me. This problem at work is turning me into somebody I could easily hate. And you *know* I'm not a hateful person."

Nick rubbed her back in a circular motion. "I know you're not, sweetheart. I even know you didn't mean what you said about Nicky, but I couldn't let you get away with it. I had to let you know how I felt. I don't ever want to hide my feelings from you again, Jess. I want everything out in the open with us."

"What if I can't do that?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter. I know I've hidden things from you in the past—important things that I should have told you. But I swear, Jess, I'll be open and honest with you from now on. I don't care if you can do it with me or not."

Without releasing him, she lifted her head to gaze up into his green eyes. "If you mean that, let me hear the tape."

"I wish I could, but I don't think it's a good idea. You're already under a lot of stress."

"There are voices other than mine on it, aren't there."

"Absolutely not," he said, the firmness of his voice telling her it was the truth.

"Then what's on it? And don't tell me nothing, because I can tell by the look on your face it would be a lie."

"Let's go sit down first." With his arm around her shoulders, he led her to the couch, where they once again sat down. Taking her hand in his, he tenderly rubbed the back of it with his thumb. "You're right, honey. There is more on the tape than just your voice, but it isn't other voices. You passed out while you were on the phone. I heard you drop the phone, and I heard you fall. That was probably when you hit your head."

"Then it really happened?"

"It happened, sweetheart," he vowed. "On our son's grave it happened."

"Thank *God*. So why can't I hear it?"

Nick grinned. "Did I just hear you swear, Mrs. Nelson?"

"You know I don't swear," she replied. "I was thanking God. Now why can't I hear it?"

Turning serious again, Nick said, "There was even more on that tape, which is why I kept it. Jessie, somebody was there with you. I didn't lie when I told you there were no other voices—but there *were* footsteps."

Grasping both of his hands, Jessie gazed at him with a pleading expression. "I want you to do me a favor, Nick. I want you to find out what's going on. You're a writer. You *know* about espionage and spies, because you've researched it extensively. I'll pay you five hundred dollars a day to act as a private investigator. That means you can't trust anybody—including me. You *have* to be impartial. Do you think you can?"

"Where you're concerned?" he exclaimed. "You've *got* to be kidding."

"I'm serious, Nick," she responded. "Maybe *deadly* serious, if someone is trying to gaslight me."

"Okay," he agreed. "I'll take it on one condition. I don't want the money. Let's start right now by making out a list of suspects."

## NINE

At three a.m., Jessie woke with a start. She and Nick had discussed the case for two hours then had chatted about mundane things until she'd relaxed enough to sleep. It was about nine when she'd reluctantly sent Nick home. Now her dream reminded her of something important that he needed to know for his investigation.

Sitting in bed, she picked up the phone and dialed his number. When he answered on the twelfth ring, she spoke in an frantic tone. "Nick, it's me. You have to come back right away."

"Are you all right?" he asked in concern.

Upon hearing his tone, Jessie realized how her own voice must have sounded and calmed to reply, "I'm fine, but I thought of something important. We have to talk—and it can't wait until morning."

"Are you sure it's that important, Jess?" He yawned, and Jessie felt a slight twinge of guilt for having disturbed his rest. But before she could apologize, he added, "I haven't gotten much sleep the last few nights, and I was doing some heavy-duty log-sawing."

Oh, well. She'd made the call and woken him. She may as well tell him the reason behind her actions. "It's about my car, Nick. I'd completely forgotten something."

"What's that?"

"Not on the phone. We can't take any chances." Although curious as to why she'd said such a thing, Jessie decided against taking her words back. It wouldn't do any good, anyway.

"Oh, all right," he agreed. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

For twenty minutes, Jessie paced her apartment in her nightshirt. Nick hadn't sounded like he wanted to come, but at least, he hadn't argued about it. He'd accepted that she didn't want to talk on the phone with almost no questions. Maybe he, too, realized that it could be bugged. Come to think of it, the entire apartment could be bugged!

She had no idea why she was thinking along these lines, but she knew one thing: She and Nick couldn't discuss anything important in her apartment.

Picking up the phone handset, she stared at it for several seconds. It probably wouldn't do any good to call and change their plans, because Nick would question her if she did. With a sigh, she returned the handset to its cradle. She should probably start using her cell phone to make calls, anyway. It was less likely to be bugged.

Besides, Nick had probably already left. The only way to keep him from her apartment was to change her clothes and meet him downstairs.

After putting on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, she took her keys, bolt-locked the door from the outside, and took the elevator to the main floor. The clock near the stairwell showed that she paced anxiously for another ten minutes before Nick pulled his RAV4 into the lot.

Jessie raced from the building and made her way through the maze of cars while Nick found an empty space. Even before he could get out, she knocked on the passenger window.

Nick started at the noise but shook his head when he realized who it was. The lock clicked as he unlocked the door for her.

"What the hell are you doing down here in the middle of the night?" he demanded as she got in, closing the door behind her.

"You know I didn't think it would be safe talking on the phone. Then I got to thinking that if somebody bugged my phone, they could have bugged the rest of my place, too." When Nick laughed, she shot him an irritated look. "It isn't funny."

"Yes, it is," he said with a chuckle. "You keep accusing me of writing too many spy novels and letting them go to my head. Now you're acting like this. This isn't the cloak-and-dagger situation you're making it out to be. You've been *reading* too many espionage novels—but they haven't been mine, because I only used those devices once. Or maybe you've been watching too many made-for-TV movies."

Jessie punched him lightly in the biceps. "Stop teasing me. This is serious."

"I gathered that much. So, what did you remember?"

"My car door wasn't locked when I finally found it this afternoon."

"So?"

"So, I *always* lock it, Nick. It's a reflex action. I may not have been paying a lot of attention to what I was doing when I went in to work this morning, but I know I locked that door. I remember that much—even if it is rather vague. But when I put my hand in the handle to open it this afternoon, it didn't beep like it does when it's been locked."

"That doesn't mean anything, Jess," he said as he took her hand in his. Tension tightened

every muscle in her body, but already she could feel that this small touch relieve some of it. He caressed her hand with both of his. "You probably just forgot."

"No," she insisted. "I *never* forget to lock it. I've been known to forget to leave it unlocked—like when I house-sit for Mom and Dad and park in their garage. But I never forget to lock it."

"You've been under a lot of stress lately," he reminded her. "You're bound to make mistakes. And when you went to work, you were still in a lot of pain. You told me so yourself."

Jerking her hand from his, she glared at him and enunciated each word with deliberate care. "I did *not* make a mistake. I locked my car. And now I'm sure that somebody used it while I was at work."

Nick studied her as he replied. "All right, Jess. You locked your car. Maybe we can narrow down the list of suspects."

"We sure can, because *I'm* the only one who has keys. Well, so do my parents, but we both know they'd never do anything like this to me."

"I don't doubt that for a second. Are you *sure* nobody else has keys to your car?"

"Positive."

"Then why do you think your apartment might be bugged?"

Jessie stared at him, unable to think of a response.

"Oh, God!" she wailed, burying her face in her hands. "Now I'm paranoid. This whole situation's turning me into a raving lunatic."

Reaching across the car, he took her into his arms. "You're not paranoid, Jess, and you're not a lunatic. You're just scared senseless."

"That's *so* reassuring," she said. "Now I don't have any sense, either."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"You don't understand, Nick." This whole conversation was starting to get ludicrous. But she needed to talk this out with him if she wanted answers. No matter how much she needed his support right now, she needed him to comprehend everything even more. And she needed him to find out who was stealing classified information. That meant he had to know everything pertinent to the case, even if it made her look bad. "I had another headache today."

"Of course, you did," he comforted. "You took a nasty knock on your head."

“Stop interrupting me!” she ordered. “I had a headache, so I told Rachel that I was going to take a nap before I went home. I told her that I didn’t want to be disturbed. Then I went back and locked myself in my office. I’ve never done that before. That’s when I laid my head down. When I woke up, I remember thinking how odd it was because I couldn’t remember a single dream.”

“Stop talking like that!” he demanded in a pained voice. “I know where you’re heading with this, and you’re not a nut-case. You’re a healthy, *sane* woman. And I love you. I won’t listen to this kind of talk anymore.”

“We have to face it, Nick.”

“I’ll face *nothing*.” He grabbed her head and forced her to look at him. “You’re going through some tough times, Jessie, and I’m going to solve this damned mystery if for no other reason than to prove you wrong about yourself.”

“But ...”

“There’s an explanation for all this, honey. All you have to do is stay sane long enough for me prove it. Don’t let the person or persons doing this to you drive you over the edge.” Releasing her, he shook his head. “God, I wish they still made cars bench seats in the front. I can’t hold you and comfort you like I want to in bucket seats.”

“Let’s get in the back.”

When they were comfortable in the back seat, Nick drew her against him, wrapping his arms around her waist.

Content, Jessie released a heavy sigh then said, “You know something, Nick? I want you to be right about this. Honest. But I can’t help wondering about everything. Take the car incident. How else could you explain it?”

“Somebody could have taken your keys without you realizing it. They could have had duplicates made.”

Jessie gasped in horror and grabbed his forearms. His words made more sense than she wanted them to. In fact, they reminded her of something else she hadn’t considered before.

“What is it, honey?” he asked, drawing her back to the present.

“You’re right,” she admitted, her face hot with embarrassment. “It’s a lot less likely that I’m crazy than it is that I’m being framed, which is exactly what somebody who’s gaslighting me could do. Obviously, somebody wants it to look like I’m doing this to keep the heat off them. But who? And why me?”

“I don’t know who yet, but I do know why. It’s got to be because you’re so damned naive.

You trust everybody.” He paused a moment for effect. “And there’s one person you trust *way* too much.”

Delighting in the feel of the furry forearms under her light touch, she giggled. “You’re just jealous, Nick Ramsdale.”

He hugged her and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll grant that. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have an open mind about Hardy. The man’s no good, sweetheart.”

“I don’t call jealousy having an open mind. Besides, the only reason you think he’s no good is because you don’t like him. You don’t have any proof of ...” She stopped midsentence. From the moment Nick had heard that she was engaged, he’d been trying to convince her that Todd wasn’t good for her. He’d spent the last few days doing everything he could to break them up. And why? Because he was jealous? Or was something else behind his actions?

Then there was the incident Sunday night. Todd had assaulted her, had threatened to murder her. And Nick had come to her rescue—because he’d stayed nearby to keep an eye on her apartment in case of trouble. Again, there could be two reasons for that. One, that he was jealous; and two, that he knew something about Todd that he didn’t want to tell her.

An unexpected thought flashed across her mind. When she’d last talked to Steve, he’d told her that Nick had said something about running down a lead. But Nick had told her that he was going to do research. That discrepancy could only mean one thing. Nick was hiding something.

“All right, Ramsdale,” she said after only a few seconds of silence. “It’s time for you to cough up all the details. What do you have on Todd that you won’t tell me?”

“Nothing,” he replied with a shrug.

“You’re lying,” she proclaimed. “You always shrug your shoulders when you lie. I first noticed it the day we started dating. You did it when you tried to give me a good night kiss and I wouldn’t let you. You said it was no big deal and shrugged your shoulders. But I could tell by the look in your eyes that it was a *huge* deal. I’d never seen such a wounded look in my life. Now tell me about Todd.”

“Okay, I admit it,” he said. “You caught me in a lie. But I only have suspicions because of some informants’ claims. I can’t prove a damned thing, and maybe I never will.”

“You are trying, though, aren’t you? That’s why Steve told me that you were out investigating a lead today—or yesterday now.”

“God, that kid’s got a big mouth,” Nick complained.

“And I’m glad. What kind of lead was it?”



"I'd heard that he was taking bribes, that he has his hand in a few cookie jars that it doesn't belong in. You know what I'm talking about, don't you? Conflict of interest kind of things. Unfortunately, I can't find any evidence that it's true. And I found out something about his past that was *very* well hidden."

"Such as?" she prompted.

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do," she insisted. "What kind of trouble is Todd in?"

"None yet. If I prove these allegations, though, he could be ousted from his seat in the state senate. And his chance of getting to Washington will be wiped out forever."

"Tell me," she demanded.

"Oh, all right. He's got deals in some government-contracted agencies—at least, that's the rumor. But it won't be easy to prove, because he's covered his tracks well. I can't find his name on a single public record."

"Did you ever stop to think that he's clean?" she asked. "Did you even once think that you're only believing these rumors because he's engaged to me?"

"If I hadn't come across the information before I found that out, I would have considered it. But everything I'm investigating started long before I saw that article in the paper. I've been quietly working on this for the past two months. Then there are some other ..."

Nick stopped in the middle of his sentence, and Jessie knew that he'd uncovered something in Maui.

"So, there *is* more," she worded as she moved to gaze at him. "I knew that wasn't all. He could go to jail for something he's allegedly doing, couldn't he. For a long time, right?"

Nick crossed his arms over his broad chest and lifted his shoulders. "I don't know what else I can tell you, Jess."

"You're shrugging again." When his shoulders fell back into place, Jessie giggled. "We know each other awfully well, Nick—so well that I can tell you what's on your mind. You think I'm going to be upset about something. That's why you won't tell me all of your information."

"It's all hearsay," he replied. "I can't substantiate the claims I've heard."

Jessie caught his slight shrug and knew that he was lying, even if he was willing himself not to react in a way that would show her. Determined to get answers, she asked, "Where did you hear these claims? Are your sources reliable?"

“They always have been before.”

“But it’s possible they aren’t this time?”

“Anything’s possible when you pay low-lives for information,” he admitted with a grimace. “Look, Jessie, somehow we got off the subject. We need to find out what’s going on at your office. We need to *concentrate* on that. It’s a hell of a lot more pressing than a few informants’ overactive imaginations.”

“You obviously have what you consider a good reason to believe that their imaginations *aren’t* overactive.”

“I’m not going to talk about Hardy again tonight,” he declared. “I’m going to discuss your problems and how we can solve them. Until we do that, you can’t commit yourself to me, and *that’s* most important as far as I’m concerned. Now, who borrowed your car in the past week?”

Knowing that Nick would never continue the subject of Todd in that state of mind, she replied, “Nobody, I’ve never even loaned my car to anybody.” She paused as an unexpected memory came to her. “Wait a minute! That’s not true. *Todd* borrowed it when his was in the shop about five weeks ago.”

“So, he had your car key for a full day?”

“Two,” she admitted, bowing her head in embarrassment. Then she returned her nervous gaze to meet his. “And he didn’t just have my car key. He had *all* of my keys. I’d taken one of the days off, so we could look for my ring. The other day he drove me to work and picked me up.”

“That still means he had a full day to do whatever he wanted to with your keys. He had plenty of time to copy them.”

Despite the sound of things, Jessie couldn’t believe that Todd would do such a thing if he loved her. She had to defend him against Nick’s accusations. “But he has no use for them, except maybe the car key.”

“He could have been the one using your car while you napped.”

She shook her head. “I doubt it. He doesn’t have a base decal on his car.”

“Neither do I, but it wasn’t that hard to get on when I was looking for you. I purchased a year pass a few months ago, because I sometimes need to consult with a friend who lives on base.”

“Oh, my God!” she suddenly exclaimed.

Nick laughed. "You're starting to swear more and more, Mrs. Nelson. That's three times in less than twelve hours."

"You're a bad influence on me," she returned with a playful grin. "Anyway, you're right. Todd *could* have taken my car." She paused, still having doubts of his role in what was happening. "But why would he?"

"To frame you, of course."

Sighing, she contemplated his suggestion. "I don't think so, Nick. I'm sorry, but I just can't believe Todd would do something like that to me. I believe him when he says he loves me."

"Why can't you believe that about me?" he asked.

"I do," she returned, surprised by his question.

"Well, you've sure as hell never given me any indication that you do."

"I suppose I haven't," she granted. "Give me a break, Nick. This isn't even what we're discussing right now. We have to deal with my car incident. Instead, you're trying to convict and hang Todd for some crime you can't even prove he committed."

"Well, you sure as hell can't prove that he *didn't*."

"I can tell you something that might change your mind. I've left my purse unattended for hours at a time at the office. I trusted everybody there because we all have top secret clearances. I figured that anybody with that kind of FBI investigation behind them wouldn't bother confiscating a few dollars that I might have in my wallet."

"But they might have temporarily confiscated your keys?"

"I'm beginning to think it's possible."

"Wonders shall never cease!" he exclaimed with a laugh. "The lady's admitting she might not know everything that goes on around her."

Jessie giggled again. "You're so good at humbling me. You realize what we've just done, though, don't you?"

With a grimace, Nick blew air through his slightly parted lips. "Unfortunately. We've just identified every suspect on our list. We haven't eliminated a single person."

"It could also mean that any of those people could have had access to my apartment."

"You mean you've finally eliminated Miss Alter Personality?" he teased.

Jessie laughed and hugged him. "All right. I admit that I went off the deep end for a while,

but I'm back on dry ground again. And I'm determined to help you find out who's been stealing government secrets—even if it's Todd, like you suspect." When his mouth dropped open in surprise, she laughed again. "Okay, you haven't said the words. Your implication was all I needed."

With a heavy sigh of exasperation, Nick shook his head. Jessie smiled. He didn't want her to help, but he couldn't see a way out of it, either. A moment later, he confirmed her thoughts.

"I'll let you help on one condition," he agreed. "You have to follow my instructions to the letter. Don't you dare go off on another tangent, or you could get yourself killed."

She crossed her heart with her finger then held her hand up in a halting gesture. "On my honor, boss."

"You'd *better* think of me as your boss," he said with a nervous chuckle. "If you don't, you could get in even deeper trouble. Now let's take a walk on the beach and discuss this in a more pleasant, and bigger, surrounding."

From the condominium lobby, the figure watched them get out of the car and stroll toward the beach. Those two were getting too close. They had to be stopped before they ruined the plan.

Everything had been working quite smoothly until Nick Ramsdale came onto the scene. That was when things started to fall apart. Controlling Jessie had been no problem, but Ramsdale was getting in the way. He was getting too nosy for his own—and Jessie's—good. He was obviously very important to her, and that meant trouble in more ways than one. They should have taken Nick into consideration long before they started the project or, at least, in the planning stages. There was only one way out of the problem, too. Jessie and Nick had to be separated—permanently!

## TEN

Todd sat at the table in the restaurant, anxiously awaiting the woman who had phoned him earlier. He'd never been happier than he had been in the last three months. Jessie had brought a joy to him that he hadn't known since he'd caught his fiancée in bed with another man. He'd finally found another woman to love, and she'd done the same thing. Actually, she hadn't, but it hurt just as much. And he'd had the same reaction.

In a way, he was glad that Ramsdale had shown up when he did. He hadn't wanted to kill Jessie, but it could have happened if Ramsdale hadn't stopped him. It was hard to keep from buying a thank-you card and sending it to Ramsdale anonymously. The only thing keeping him from the nearest Hallmark store was that Ramsdale was too smart. He would figure out in a second who had sent it.

Motioning to the waitress carrying a coffee pot, Todd asked for a refill. She poured more into his cup then moved on while he sipped the steamy liquid. Across the building, several women came in the front door. Todd tensed. Would one of them come to his table? When none did, he sighed in relief.

Who was this woman who'd been calling him for the past four months, anyway? Why wouldn't she give him her name? What a stupid question! He knew why. She wouldn't tell him who she was because she was blackmailing him—and doing a damned good job of it. He didn't know where she'd gotten her information, but she knew all about the mistake he'd made thirteen years ago.

Thirteen years ago, he thought. How appropriate. The last thing he needed now, though, was bad luck. No, the *last* thing he needed was that story to hit the papers. That would ruin his career faster than Ramsdale or Jessie could if they reported his jealous rage.

One mistake! That's all it had been in his thirty-five years of life. One mistake made when he had just graduated from college, and this woman had somehow found out about it. He'd been completely clean before and after that time he'd lost control. He hadn't even gotten a traffic citation until he'd back-ended Jessie's car—just as the woman had instructed him to do.

That was another thing. Why did that woman want Jessie involved? Why not just blackmail him for money? He had plenty that he could give her. It didn't make sense. Jessie was a

sweet, innocent woman—quite unlike the blackmailer. Although he wasn't sure, he suspected it pertained to Jessie's civil service job that the woman had told him about.

Two more women walked into the restaurant, followed almost immediately by another woman and a man. The long-haired brunette thanked the man while she searched the room until her gaze fell on Todd. Then she strode confidently to the table and sat down.

"Nice of you to meet me here so early," the brown-eyed brunette said as Todd examined her.

"I didn't have much choice," he returned. She wasn't very tall—maybe five-four—and her features were rather sharp. Not at all like Jessie's smooth-flowing facial structure. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Now, Senator Hardy, you know I can't tell you that," she replied with a smile. "Did you take care of everything last night?"

Todd sighed loudly and sipped his coffee again before he responded. "I couldn't. Jessie was nice and cooperative by being in bed, but I accidentally woke her up."

"She didn't see you, did she?" the woman asked.

"No. I picked up the lamp I'd knocked over and got into the guest bedroom closet as fast as I could. She called Ramsdale, but I don't think it was because I'd scared her. She said something about her car then asked him to come over again."

She chuckled. "Not satisfying your fiancée in bed?"

"Not all women want to go to bed before marriage," Todd shot back. Then, realizing that his overreaction to the question would only cause the woman more suspicion, he calmed somewhat and explained, "She must have changed her mind about meeting him in her condo, because she got dressed and left. I waited about five minutes before I got out. I even went down the stairs so she wouldn't see me get off the elevator. It's a good thing I did, too. She was pacing in front of the door like a caged cat. I had to go out a different door."

"And you don't think she knew you were there?"

"Absolutely not. I wonder why she wanted to see Ramsdale in the middle of the night."

"I don't know," the brunette said, "but I don't like it. He's becoming a real pain in the backside. It's time to get rid of him."

Todd stared at her in amazement. Was she talking about killing Ramsdale? Or did she just want to get him out of Jessie's life. He could probably handle the latter, but the first? Leaning across the table, he whispered, "If you're thinking what I think you are, you can forget it. Publish whatever the hell you want to. Trying to bug her condo was bad enough. I won't

kill the man.”

“Who said anything about killing him?”

“That’s what getting rid of people usually means to a blackmailer, isn’t it?”

“Not necessarily. Maybe we could give him a new idea for a book that would take him out of Hawaii.”

Todd shook his head slowly. “It wouldn’t work. Jessie said they have a bond between them that can’t be broken, and I believe her.”

“What kind of bond?”

“How the hell do *I* know? She wouldn’t tell me. I didn’t even know they knew each other until a few days ago. Why wasn’t I told, anyway? Maybe I could have avoided all these problems.”

“It’s too late for hindsight, Hardy,” the woman replied. “I saw them together last night, too, and now we have to come up with something to break that bond you mentioned. We have to make sure that they don’t see each other anymore. And there’s only one person who can effectively take care of that little problem—her fiancé.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Todd said. “We had a huge fight, and she’s really mad at me right now. She even took off my ring.”

“So make up with her and get her to put it back on.”

“How when she won’t even see me?”

“For God’s sake, what did you do to the woman?”

“That’s none of your damned business,” Todd proclaimed. “The point is we’re on the outs at the moment. And she’s leaning heavily on Ramsdale.”

“Look, Hardy,” the woman said, her voice taking on a menacing tone, “you’re in this for the duration. When my job’s done, so is yours. Or I tell the press everything I know about a certain assault charge.”

That did it! He’d had enough of this woman’s blackmail. “Do you know what’s going to happen before they print anything? They’re going to check *all* the records. And do you know what they’ll find? Nothing, because I talked her into dropping all the charges.”

“Don’t be so sure, Hardy,” the woman said as she rose. “*I* found out about it, remember? The press can confirm anything that I can. Stay near the phone. I’ll have another job for you real soon.”

She stalked out of the building, leaving Todd to contemplate her words. When he'd gotten into this mess, he'd been desperate to protect his job. Then he'd met Jessie—and had unexpectedly fallen in love. Then, without warning, Ramsdale had appeared and now things were out of control. Nothing was going right. And nothing would until he could think of a way to separate Jessie and Ramsdale without either suspecting what he was doing.

\*\*\*

Jessie pulled up beside the guard gate and rolled down the window of Nick's RAV4. When the guard came out of the booth, she passed him her badge. "Good morning. I'm borrowing a friend's car, while mine's in the shop. I need a pass to get to my office for the rest of the week."

After the guard wrote her a pass, she thanked him, put it on the dashboard, and drove on. She didn't like not having her own car, but Nick had a valid point. If she didn't have it, nobody from the office could use it.

He had also confiscated most of her keys, leaving her with only the bolt lock for her apartment and the ones to get into her offices. Those she carried in her pocket as he had instructed. She didn't like that, either, but she'd agreed so Nick wouldn't worry.

Pulling into a parking place, Jessie looked up to see if the car would be visible from the window outside the office. She wasn't sure, so she backed the Samurai out of the space and drove closer to the building. Finding an empty spot directly in front of the windows, she parked again. Now she could see it when she made her hourly check.

Even as she locked his car door, she wondered the advisability of doing as he'd instructed. She would look awfully suspicious if she checked on the car that often, and that would make her colleagues question her. Then again, it would also assure her that she didn't lose it.

On the way into the building, her mind wandered to Nick's desire to contact Todd that morning. With Todd busy in the state capitol building, though, Nick might not even be able to get hold of him. Now she wished Nick had told her why he wanted to talk to Todd. If he had, she wouldn't be so nervous about the meeting. As it was, she didn't know what to expect—except that a meeting was possible. Hopefully, Nick would call her as soon as he set up a time, like he'd promised.

While she waited for the elevator, a man's voice startled her.

"I know it's awfully early for you to be at work, Jessie," Gary teased, "but the least you can do is *pretend* that you're awake."



“Gary!” she exclaimed. “I didn’t see.”

“Didn’t hear me, either. I said good morning, and you didn’t answer. What are you doing here at this hour?”

“Trying to get a decent parking place,” she answered as the elevator doors opened. Getting on, she waited for Gary to join her before she pushed the appropriate floor button. The doors slid shut with a thud. “I understand you heard about my little incident of a misplaced car yesterday.”

“I sure did,” he replied. “I attributed it to your headache. How are you feeling this morning?”

“Better. The headache’s gone and so is most of the achiness. Unfortunately, my neck is still killing me.”

“Maybe you should have a doctor look at it.”

“Naw. It’ll be okay in a few days.”

“It could be whiplash.”

“I know, but I’d rather not bother a doctor about such a little thing.”

“Whiplash isn’t exactly little. I’ve had it, and it hurts like hell.” The doors opened, and he held one while Jessie exited the elevator then followed her. “In fact, I still have trouble sometimes.”

“Then you must know that there’s nothing a doctor can do that I can’t.”

“Rest would help—complete and total bedrest.”

Jessie grimaced at the idea. “I don’t even like to put my head down on anything my neck hurts so bad.”

“Stop on your way home and get one of those contour pillows,” he suggested, working the numbers on the combination lock. “I have one, and it works wonders. Really gives my neck support.”

“Thanks for the tip. Maybe I’ll do it.”

After Gary signed in, Jessie did the same while he opened the door. As soon as she could, she got out her keys and slid one into the lock on her office doorknob. To her horror, it wasn’t locked. Thank goodness, she’d put the classified documents in her desk!

She couldn’t show Gary her concern. If she did, she might give herself away. Strolling to

her desk, she unlocked it then put her purse in the drawer. Immediately, she took out the paperwork and began perusing it. Everything seemed to be in order, but she needed to go through it more carefully to be sure.

“Are you going to try to stick it out all day?” Gary asked from her doorway.

Jessie looked up at him, stunned that he’d seen what she was doing. But Nick had warned her to do everything in her power not to give away her emotions, so she maintained a calm tone. “I thought I’d try. Why?”

“You’re pushing it, Jessie. You’ve got plenty of sick leave. Go ahead and take some.”

“What about the lost documents?”

Gary’s eyes narrowed as he entered the room, closing the door behind him. “Documents? Plural? I thought there was only one.”

“There is,” she said. She’d already blundered once. She had to be extra careful about what she said next if she didn’t want her name associated with a second missing document. On top of that, Gary had closed the door again, and it made her nervous. Todd had scared her more than she’d thought if it *still* bothered her to be alone with a man other than Nick. Drawing on all the reserve calm she possessed, she asked, “Why would you think otherwise?”

“*You’re* the one who said documents.”

“I didn’t mean to.” If nothing else she said that day was the truth, at least the last statement was. She had definitely *not* intended to use the plural. “And I don’t want to take leave for a little pain in the neck.”

“It doesn’t look little from the way you’re moving. You can spend the morning going through the files if you want to, but I want you out of here by noon. Understood?”

“Understood,” she acknowledged. “Now may I please get to work? I want to finish this file from yesterday before I get another one.”

When Jessie found nothing else missing, she dismissed her concern as part of the headache she’d had the previous day. Maybe she hadn’t locked her door as she’d thought. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time that she’d forgotten something recently.

About ten o’clock, Rachel poked her head around the doorway and told Jessie that she had a phone call. Thanking the secretary, Jessie picked up the handset. “This is Jessie Nelson.”

“And this is your only true love,” Nick said merrily.

“Todd!” she returned with an impish giggle. “I didn’t expect you to call.”

“What a comic,” he responded. “The man’s a jerk, and you know it. Forget him and make a life with me.”

“No fair trying to coerce me when I only had three hours of sleep. I need more than that to fend off your crazy ideas.”

“It’s not crazy,” he declared. “And I’m going to get you to agree—very soon. Now, on to why I called. I got hold of your not-so-only true love. We’re meeting for lunch.”

“Really?” she asked, her interest piqued by the mysterious tone in his voice. “Where?”

“There’s no way I’m telling you that. You’ll show up and blow everything.”

“What if I promise not to?”

“I still won’t say. I will tell you one thing, though. Our meeting’s in a very public setting. I want to try to bait him into showing a little of his temper.”

“Nick!” she exclaimed. “You can’t! You could get hurt.”

“I know what I’m doing, honey, so settle down.”

“Is something wrong?” Gary asked from the doorway. “I heard you call out.”

Jessie shot her startled gaze to her boss. Her face heated in embarrassment. She should have known better than to be so loud at the office. Inhaling deeply to still her nervous reaction, she replied, “Nothing’s wrong, Gary. I just overreacted a little to something somebody told me.”

“Nick Ramsdale?” When she nodded, Gary said, “I’m not so sure I like the idea of that guy hanging around you. I read an article about him that Lisa found in an old magazine she had laying around the house. You know my wife. She saves everything. The man’s a womanizer, Jessie. You’re too good for him. Tell him to get lost.”

“Jess?” Nick asked into her ear. “What’s going on there? Who are you talking to?”

“My boss. I have to get back to work. You can reach me at home later. Gary’s kicking me out of here at noon so I can get some good rest. And I’m so tired I’m going to take him up on it.”

“Okay, sweetheart. I’ll either call or drop by, so keep yourself available. Bye now.”

“Bye.” Hanging up the receiver, she glared at Gary. “You’re my boss, Gary—not my mother. You can’t tell me who I can and cannot associate with—unless, *possibly*, that person is a threat to secrets here. And Nick’s definitely no threat.”

“He could be,” Gary worded flatly. “If you ask me, he has an unnatural interest in your work.”

“He does not. And even if he did, I wouldn’t tell him anything confidential. I don’t even tell people what I do for a living.”

“I still say you shouldn’t be around him,” Gary said as he left. “And I want you to give some serious consideration to telling him to get out of your life.”

Stunned, Jessie stared at the empty space where Gary had stood only a moment before. What right did he have to tell her that she shouldn’t be around Nick? Gary didn’t even know Nick. Besides, she didn’t care *what* that article said; Nick was no womanizer.

She’d read every article about Nick that she’d ever seen, and not one had even insinuated such a thing. Then again, it was possible that something had been printed in Hawaii while she was in D.C. She wouldn’t have seen that article, because her mother told her that she would never send anything about Nick to her after he’d hurt her by getting her pregnant. What she needed to do was have Gary bring the magazine to work so she could read the article. That was the only way she would believe it was true.

Suddenly, another idea came to her. Gary was on the list of suspects she’d made with Nick the night before. If he’d somehow found out about that list, Gary might be using an imaginary article to get her away from Nick. Then Gary would be free to do whatever he wanted to her because she wouldn’t have any protection.

No doubt remained. She had to be careful around Gary, as well as everybody else in her office.

\*\*\*

Nick waited impatiently on the nearly white sand of Waikiki Beach. There were plenty of people present—plenty of people to witness a violent state senator. He just hoped his plan worked.

Seeing Todd stride across the beach, Nick rose so Todd could see him. This wasn’t going to be easy given Todd’s well-defined public image. The man obviously hid his emotions very well when he was around his constituents, and Nick had every reason to believe that wouldn’t change in these circumstances. With any luck, his plan could easily make the senator lose his cool façade.

Nick inhaled as Todd came to a stop before him. It was showtime. God, he hoped this worked.

“Okay, Ramsdale,” Todd said. “I’m here. What the hell do you want?”

“It’s not so much what I want,” Nick explained, struggling to keep his voice calm. “It’s more what I *don’t* want. I don’t want you to bother Jessie anymore. I don’t want you anywhere *near* her.”

“What the hell?” Todd exclaimed. “Jessie’s my fiancée. I have every right to be near her.”

“After Sunday night? I think not. I’ve loved Jessie for a long time, Hardy. Ever since she was a student in my class. At first it was physical, but after just one date, I fell head-over-heels in love. I lost her to my best friend years ago, and I’ll be *damned* if I’ll lose her again. You assaulted her Sunday night,” Nick declared, his voice rising so the sunbathers and swimmers could hear him, “and I won’t let you do it again. Just get out of her life. And *stay* the hell out.”

“I love Jessie, too,” Todd returned. “If you want her, you’re going to have to fight me like a man. You’re going to have to win her heart, because right now *I* have it.”

“The hell you do!” Nick reached into his pocket and withdrew something in his fist. Watching Todd’s expression, he slowly opened his hand. As Nick had hoped, Todd’s eyes widened in surprise. In the middle of Nick’s palm lay Jessie’s diamond ring.

“Where did you get that?” Todd demanded.

“I took it off her finger,” Nick replied. “Not only that, but she didn’t offer so much as a smidgen of resistance. She didn’t even make a token complaint.”

“I don’t believe you!”

“It’s true. And she’ll tell you the same thing if you ask her. We have a very tight bond, Hardy, one that even you can’t break. And if you try, do you know what’s going to happen?”

Todd grabbed for the ring, but Nick quickly closed his hand. Glaring at the slightly taller man, Todd folded his hands into fists and raised them before his face. “I have a Golden Glove award, Ramsdale—two of them, in fact. Let’s have it out.”

Glancing around them, Nick stifled a satisfied grin. His plan was working. Most of the people nearby watched the scene with interest. He struggled to keep a straight face and spoke calmly. “I don’t fight men smaller than I, not unless I have to save the life of the woman I love.”

“I could tear you apart!” Todd shouted.

“Probably, but I’m not going to give you the chance. I’m leaving now, Hardy,” Nick said as he started away. Then he stopped and faced Todd again. “By the way, here’s your ring back. Jessie won’t be needing it.”

While Todd stood by in stunned disbelief, Nick tossed the ring high into the air. Todd jumped in a desperate attempt to catch it, but the ring sailed well above his head and landed about five feet out into the ocean.

“You God damned bastard!” Todd cried out. “I’ll kill you for this!”

Chuckling under his breath, Nick walked away. That was exactly what he’d been waiting to hear. Todd had shown everybody on the beach that he had a temper, and he’d threatened murder. If that didn’t keep State Senator Todd Hardy away from Jessie, he didn’t know what would. It would probably even expose him if he was involved in espionage. And Nick was positive that he was, because despite what he’d told Jessie, he’d uncovered more than a connection with government-contracted agencies. He’d also heard a rumor that Hardy was involved with an Iranian contact.

## ELEVEN

Jessie could hardly wait until Nick arrived, or at least called. Although he hadn't said so, she assumed the meeting with Todd must have been during the lunch hour. When he hadn't contacted her by two, she sat down to watch the only soap opera she taped each day. Three rolled around, and he still hadn't contacted her.

Now she was beginning to worry. Maybe something had happened so he couldn't call. Maybe he'd been in an accident or gotten hit by a car. Worse yet, he could have succeeded in his plan to get Todd to show his temper. Todd could easily have beaten Nick up since he had those Golden Glove Awards. Nick could be in the hospital—or the morgue!

Wandering to the balcony, she stared down into the parking lot. Her car was nowhere in sight. Where was Nick, anyway? Why didn't he call if he couldn't come? The only explanation was that he was hurt and couldn't.

She went to her bedroom. As she picked up the phone, someone knocked. Racing to the door, she pulled it open, asking frantically, "Oh, Nick! Where have ...?" Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw that, again, it wasn't Nick. "Todd! What are *you* doing here?"

He brushed past her but said nothing until she closed the door and joined him in the living room. Facing her, he glared at her as he announced, "I have to know the truth, Jessie. Did you take my ring off?"

"Why do you ask that?" she asked.

Taking the ring from his pocket, he held it up before her eyes. "Because Ramsdale said that *he* did—just before he threw it in the ocean. I thought I'd never find it again. Now who took off my ring?"

Jessie stared at the diamond in amazement. So, Nick had given it to him—indirectly. Steeling herself for a drawn-out confrontation, she took a deep breath and released it slowly.

"You don't understand, Todd," she explained, careful of her wording. "I was in shock over what you did to me. I couldn't believe it. When Nick took the ring off, I couldn't react. All I knew was that I was afraid of you and needed time to think. Not seeing your ring and being reminded of our engagement every time I moved my hand gave me that time."

“Do you want it back or not?” he demanded.

She shrugged, determined to see this through to the end. The next to the last thing she wanted was for Todd to think he could run her life. The *last* thing she wanted was to make him mad.

“I don’t know, Todd. I’ve got a lot going on in my life right now. I’ve really been busy at work lately, then you hurt me. Now my boss insists that I only put in half-days until my neck improves. And believe me, that was only a compromise. He wanted me to take sick leave until I’m better; I wanted to keep working. The only reason I agreed to the compromise was because I just didn’t have enough energy to argue.”

“What am I supposed to do with the ring?”

“Keep it until I’m ready to take it back,” she suggested.

Todd slipped the diamond back into his pocket with a satisfied smile. When he reached out to embrace her, she stepped away so quickly that he missed her. He stared at her in stunned disbelief.

“Don’t even *try* to touch me,” she warned. “It’s still too soon.”

“You *are* coming back to me, aren’t you?” he asked. “You’re not going to commit to Ramsdale?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do yet,” she explained as she wandered toward the door. “I’m too confused and too busy at work to think much about it.” Opening the door, she pointed at the hallway. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d like you to leave. I want to be alone.”

Todd strode to the doorway then turned to face her. In a voice filled with bitterness, he said, “That’s funny. I got the distinct impression that you were expecting Ramsdale. You sounded worried that he wasn’t here.”

“That was before I found out that he gave you my ring back. Now good-bye.”

Jessie glimpsed Todd jumping back so as not to get hit by the door. She slammed it shut a moment before she heard him mutter something. Did he really say, “I’m going to take care of Ramsdale—the sooner the better”? But the thought left her mind almost the next moment.

Leaning back against the door, Jessie breathed through clenched teeth twice before she stopped. The tension hurt her neck too much to continue.

Nick Ramsdale had better *not* show up now. She would give him a serious piece of her mind if he did. Just the thought of him giving Todd the ring increased her fury. If she saw Nick in person, she would let him know exactly how she felt about what he’d done.



Where did he get off giving Todd the ring? Had he done it simply to get a reaction? Or had he done it because he wanted her for himself? From the way he'd been acting lately, the answer was easy. Both! He'd made it clear that he loved her—many times—and that meant he wanted her for himself. But he'd also emphatically stated that he was going to get Todd to show his temper in public. What better way to do it than produce her engagement ring than throw it into the ocean?

Jessie smiled at the thought. She could just imagine Todd searching the water with his pants legs up around his knees. Maybe Todd had even paid people to help. It wouldn't be a bit out of character.

Curious, Jessie wandered to her bedroom and dialed Nick's phone number. When there was no answer, not even from the answering machine, she hung up. Now she was even more concerned about his welfare. She tried his cell, which went directly to voice mail. Why hadn't she asked Todd if he'd had an altercation with Nick? At least, she would have an idea of where to reach him. Then again, Todd could have lied to her.

Then another theory that didn't make much sense crossed her mind. If they'd really had a fight, it would probably be on the news since both men were well known in Hawaii.

Turning on the radio/alarm beside her bed, she leaned back against the headboard to listen for the next newscast.

\*\*\*

When the phone finally stopped ringing, Nick sighed in relief. So much time had passed since he'd spoken to Jessie that it had to be her. He was glad that he hadn't turned on his answering machine to screen his calls. If he heard her voice, he would probably pick up. And he couldn't talk to her—not yet. He didn't know what to say.

Nick stared at the pictures on the table before him. The pain in his heart almost overwhelmed him. How could this be happening? Jessie was a beautiful, innocent woman. She *couldn't* be involved in espionage.

Unfortunately, the proof was before him. Granted, it was a long-distance shot; but he recognized the dress, the hairstyle, and the woman's car. That was Jessie. And the only way she could be involved in this was if she had a dual personality—just like she had once suggested. Either that, or she was conning him. But he doubted that.

Rising, he went into the study. After about ten minutes of searching, he found what he was looking for. Taking his old psychology textbook back to the table, he looked up the section on personality disorders. He thumbed through the pages until he came to the one he

wanted.

There it was: *dissociative reaction, characterized by disturbance of memory or identity (amnesia)... individual develops two or more distinct personalities that often vary widely in character or style. Often one is inhibited and moralistic, and another personality is impulsive and fun-loving.*

He swallowed hard, trying to gather the courage to read further. This sounded too much like Jessie. But no matter how hard it was, he had to finish the section if he wanted to help her. And to do that, he needed more information on the subject.

*... it is as if conflict within the individual between moral and amoral forces is resolved by splitting the original personality into separate parts, ... In episodes of amnesia, the loss of identity can remove the individual from intolerably stressful life situations ...*

There was more, but Nick couldn't continue. He'd already read more than he could bear. Considering everything that had happened recently, Jessie needed help, and he refused to see the only woman he'd ever loved to such a depth go through the experience alone. He would stand beside her, no matter what she needed to go through to heal.

Closing the book, Nick set it aside then picked up one of the pictures. Poor Jessie. She was involved in espionage and didn't even realize it.

Then he noticed something he'd missed before. He'd probably been too upset by the photographs in the large, manila envelope propped against his front door when he got home. There were raised, inverted letters on this picture. He turned it over. On the back was a clear message, although there was no ink. Whoever had written the note had probably used a piece of paper to write it, so it wasn't immediately noticeable. Nick grabbed a pencil out of the cup on his telephone table and rubbed it lightly over the words. He stared at them in shock when they became obvious.

*She knows exactly what she's doing, the message said. She's conning you.*

He refused to believe it. The Jessie he knew would never do such a thing. Then again, the Jessie he knew couldn't cook; the Jessie he knew wouldn't so willingly give in to his desires. And the Jessie he knew certainly wouldn't have let him take off her engagement ring.

Maybe this note was true. After all, a person could change a lot in six years. And a person could change a lot if something tragic happened in her life—something as tragic as the loss of a child.

"God damn it!" he exclaimed. "She *did* con me. She drew me right into her little scam and played me for the sucker she knew I would be. And she's probably doing the same thing to Hardy."

He turned the picture back over and studied it. Maybe with his new outlook, he could

view the photograph more objectively. Damn! Everything was too far away. Going to the desk in his study, he searched until he found his seldom-used magnifying glass. Returning to the dining room, he laid all seven eight-by-ten-inch pictures on the table.

The lighting there was good. The late afternoon sun streamed through the large panes of glass in the bay windows overlooking the ocean. The only way to get better light was to take the pictures onto the patio, but he couldn't do that, because the trade winds were too strong.

Hunching over the table, he put the magnifying glass between his face and the photograph with writing on it. From the first time he saw the pictures, he'd felt there was something odd about them, but he couldn't figure out what. Maybe a closer look would help. And maybe that would help him clear his doubts concerning Jessie and her involvement.

The woman's back was to the camera, so he couldn't see her face—or her figure because of the muumuu. He had no doubt that was Jessie's car, though. He was sure of it now that he could see the license plate number. It only followed that it had to be Jessie.

Now to see if he could tell who the man was. It looked a little like Hardy, but Nick couldn't be sure because the picture was blurred in that vicinity. He tried another picture then another, but all of them were blurred. That's probably why he was so skeptical about the photographs. Everything was clear except the man's face. It was almost like the man knew the picture was being taken and kept moving to avoid clear identification. Too bad he couldn't tell what was in the manila envelope that the Jessie look-alike was handing the Hardy look-alike.

Wait a minute! If only the man was blurry and Jessie's back was to the camera, ... Someone was framing Jessie! Why else would somebody put the pictures on *his* doorstep? He wasn't a cop or a G-man; he was just an author. And he couldn't do anything about the situation unless he went to the police. Nick sighed. That was out of the question with Jessie involved—be it directly or indirectly.

His mind spun with scenarios. It was possible that the pictures were sent to him so he would distrust Jessie and stay away from her. Maybe he posed some sort of threat to the photographer. If so, it wouldn't work. He would *never* desert Jessie; he would find out exactly what was going on. If she was involved and knew it, he would turn her in just like he should—no matter how deeply it hurt. But if she was involved because of a dissociative reaction, he would see that she had the best doctors available. He would help her become one person again. But since he found it difficult to believe she was involved, he needed to save her.

The first thing he should do was find out where the pictures had been taken. From the background in the photograph, it looked like someplace in the mountains. Most likely one of those tourist sites, because it overlooked Honolulu. There were other cars parked in the vicinity, too. Maybe one or more of them belonged to a worker at the site.

It was too late now, but in the morning, he would go to every tourist trap he could think of and talk to the employees. Maybe one of them had seen the pair in the photographs or, even better, the transaction.

Gathering the pictures, he slid them back into the manila envelope to put away for safe-keeping.

\*\*\*

Jessie stared at the front door. Six years ago, she'd left the mansion because of all the memories. Apparently, she hadn't changed as much as she'd thought she had when she'd walked out her condo door.

She could still see Joe coming in from work every evening at six. She could feel his arms embrace her, his lips capture hers in a welcoming kiss. Unexpected tears came to her eyes. The passing of years had done nothing to alleviate the pain of her loss.

Although it wasn't the love a woman should have for her husband, she had come to love him very deeply. Losing him to a disease like Hodgkin's tore her heart like only two other things had—losing her child and walking away from Nick.

Jessie's eyes widened in shock. Could that mean she loved Nick? She'd loved Joe in her own way, and she'd loved Nicky enough to name him after his father. She'd been devastated after each of their deaths and walking away from Nick had been no less devastating. What other conclusion could she come to, except that she loved him?

What was she doing? she wondered. She couldn't even consider loving anybody until she solved her problems. If she did, she might lose that person, too, whether it was Nick or Todd. But did she love Todd? She was so confused she didn't even know anymore.

She tried to clear her mind of past memories and future possibilities so she could concentrate on the present. Now that she and Nick were friends again, someday she would have to go back inside the home she'd shared with Joe. She may as well get the pain out of the way. Reaching out, she pushed the button.

In less than a minute, the door opened.

"Jess!" Nick exclaimed. "I didn't think you'd come here."

"I had to." Her voice cracked with emotion as she wiped a tear from her cheek. "Todd came to my place this afternoon."

“Oh, God,” Nick groaned. “You know what I did.”

Taking her hand, he gently tugged her into the marble-floored foyer. The pain in her heart increased. She could see Joe racing to her when she got back from night courses at the university. Their words echoed savagely through her memory: *I missed you, my love*, he always said. And she always giggled and offered him the same teasing reply. *I was only gone for a couple of hours*. Then he would say, *I’ll always miss you—even if you’re only gone for a couple minutes*. Finally, he would sweep her into his arms and kiss her heatedly to prove his words.

The tears overflowed to stream down her cheeks. She couldn’t bear this; she had to get out of the house. Jerking her hand from Nick’s, she turned toward the door. To her horror, it slammed shut before she could run out. Desperate, she reached for the doorknob; but Nick quickly blocked her exit, as she had blocked his several nights earlier.

“Let me out!” she shrieked as he took her into his arms. “I can’t stay here. I have to go.” Her desperation turned to sorrow in his secure embrace. Her words became softer. “Please, Nick. Let me leave. It hurts too much.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he said, stroking her hair. “But you have to do it sooner or later. Let’s get it over now.”

“No,” she sobbed while she returned his embrace. “I want to go home.”

“You are home, Jess. This estate belongs to you—not me. I’m just your caretaker.” Without releasing his hold, he directed her farther into the house. “We’ll take it one step at a time. We’re just going to walk straight through the house and go down to the beach. That’s where you and *I* had our first happy memory. It’s where we had a lot of happy memories. That’s right, sweetheart. Just take one small step at a time.”

Before Jessie knew it, she had relaxed in Nick’s arms. She walked out the patio doors holding her head erect while he kept one arm around her shoulders. By the time they reached the private beach fifty yards from the patio, she was once again at ease on her own land.

“Thank you for talking me through the house,” Jessie said as she sank onto the sand. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Sitting down beside her, he ran his hand over her bare thigh. “I love you, Jessie. There’s nothing I won’t do to help you.”

“Why did you do it, Nick?” she asked, changing the subject. “Why did you antagonize Todd? Don’t you know you could get hurt doing that? He has two Golden Glove awards.”

Nick grimaced. “I didn’t find that out until after I opened my big mouth. By then I’d already gotten myself into character and couldn’t let go of it. Besides, if I’d backed down, he would have won. As it was, I accomplished exactly what I’d planned.”

“You goaded him into a temper tantrum.”

“With a hundred or more people as witnesses. It took me a few minutes to get the response I wanted, but he finally raised his fists and threatened to tear me apart. When I threw the ring into the ocean, he threatened to kill me. That’s when I walked away. I’d accomplished what I was out for. There was no reason to hang around—other than to see if he would carry out his threat. I didn’t want the kids on the beach to see any violence, so I avoided it. Did he give you the ring back?”

Jessie drew a heart in the sand with her finger. “He asked if I wanted it, but I told him to hold it for me until I asked for it back.”

“Why?” Nick asked in surprise.

“I don’t want to marry a man with a violent temper. What if jealousy isn’t the only thing that will set it off? You know me. I don’t believe in divorce. I would stay with him forever.”

“Then don’t marry him.” Grasping her shoulders tenderly, Nick laid her back in the sand. “Marry *me* instead. I love you, Jess.” He bent over her and kissed her softly on the lips. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“But, Nick ...”

He cut her words off by covering her lips with his. This was what Jessie had been dreaming of since she’d driven onto the estate. The last time they were together here he’d made love to her, and she desperately needed the emotional release that only he could give her. Since she’d first seen Nick outside her door after six years, she knew that she wanted him again.

His tongue slithered past her lips and into her mouth, increasing her excitement the moment it touched hers. His hand cupped her breast, hardening the nipple on contact. This would be the night! She and Nick would be together again as they had the night Nicky was conceived, but this time no child would be produced. She’d made sure that would never happen again by practicing birth control—even though she had no need for it.

But there was a need that night. The heat in Nick’s kiss, the passion in his loving caresses of her body, brought her closer to the brink than she’d been the night Todd had found them together.

“Oh, Nick,” she sighed when he broke the kiss to nuzzle his way downward while he pushed her knit shirt out of his way. “I need you so much. Please. Don’t leave me wanting for more like you did the other night.”

“No, sweetheart,” he vowed. “By the time the evening ends, you’ll definitely *not* want for more. I love you, and I refuse to let your morality interfere in that love again.”

“It won’t, Nick, because that morality only goes so far.” When he kissed her exposed nipple, she moaned as her internal heat intensified and slid her fingers into his soft, thick hair. It felt so good to have him treat her like this again! Leaving him hadn’t been easy six years ago, because he’d been so good in bed. But coming back to him now, when there was so much going on in her life, was even more difficult. She couldn’t get involved with him now.

But his tongue was working its magic as he taunted her excited nipple. He was driving her wild with desire that only he had ever shown her, and she didn’t want it to end yet.

“Oh, Nick!” she sighed. “Please. I can’t take it anymore. Show me your love.”

Nick accommodated her. His lips bore down on hers hungrily; his tongue explored the sweet depths of her mouth. Oh, how Jessie enjoyed his kisses. How she loved the way he tenderly, methodically massaged her breast. No man had ever made her feel the way Nick did—not Joe, and certainly not Todd.

His hand slid seductively over her ribs to her waist and her rounded hip. Lower it went, to her bare thigh. The heat of his caress sent a shiver up her spine. So many years had past since she’d felt this good that she wondered if she’d been a fool to wait so long before contacting him.

Nick moved again, this time draping one of his legs between hers, so his thigh pressed securely against her covered womanhood. Excitement rose higher within her. For the first time ever, she dared some aggression and slipped her hands under his shirt to feel the soft hair covering his chest.

His stomach muscles rippled under her gentle touch, as though they’d been waiting for the caress for as long as she’d known him. His pectorals were taut from working out at a gym, and the hair on his chest was all that she remembered it to be—exciting to feel, drawing her closer to the chasm where she could find release.

Nick pulled back again. Kneeling over her, he yanked his shirt over his head. His hard torso exposed to her view, she slowly removed her own shirt. He reached down and slid his fingers into the elastic waistband of her shorts. As he pulled them from her body, he brought her bikini panties with them. Now she lay before him completely nude.

Nick scrambled out of his shorts while Jessie watched. He had a magnificent body, perfect as far as she was concerned. When he tossed his shorts and briefs aside, she reached up and tenderly grasped his upper arms, pulling him down to her.

Before their bodies touched, he covered her mouth with his again. The intimacy of naked contact drove Jessie mad with desire. Unable to wait for him to lead the way, she grasped his maleness and guided him into her body.

She sighed into his mouth as he slid into her, slowly, languidly, as though he wanted to savor the moment. But she didn’t want to savor anything. She wanted to make wild,

passionate love in the hot sand beneath them.

Grabbing his buttocks, she drove him into her and moved frantically. He responded in kind, filling her with such desire that she could no longer restrain herself. Within minutes, Nick took her down the path to the abyss of total commitment and joy.

After she was satisfied, he released the animal within him, satisfying her a second time before he, too, plunged over the brink. Then he lay on his back and cradled her head on his shoulder. The tension of lost top-secret documents and confrontations with Todd disappeared for now. Later would be soon enough to discuss the day's events.

Soon the sound of the waves lapping at the shore, the tender caress of Nick's large hand on her upper arm lulled her into a deep, peaceful sleep.



## TWELVE

The first thing Jessie noticed was that the sun had turned into an orange ball on the horizon. The green foliage and many palm trees on the estate looked almost brown in the sunset.

When her stomach rumbled with hunger, she giggled. That was probably what woke her up. In fact, the growl was so loud that she was surprised it didn't wake Nick up, too.

She'd never been happier, not even after the first time she'd made love with Nick. Her entire body felt alive and tingly. She felt as though she could conquer anybody who got in her way—including whoever had stolen those documents.

Sighing contentedly, she snuggled closer to Nick. His arm tightened around her shoulders, and she kissed his chest then toyed with the hair covering it. He was in awfully good shape for a man pushing forty. His hand stroked her hair.

"Your hair really turns fiery in the sunset, Jess," he said softly. "It looks sensational."

"Well, you *are* sensational," she returned in a throaty whisper. "You make me feel absolutely and totally alive again."

"That's called love."

Nervousness attacked her serenity, and she sat up to gaze at him. "I can't say that it's love, Nick, because I'm not sure what love's supposed to feel like. But I do know one thing. I've never been happier in my life."

"I was wrong," he teased as he tweaked her nipples gently. "That's *true* love—the same kind of love I have for you. Tell Hardy to take a flying leap off Diamond Head and move in here with me."

Skepticism controlled her. "Do you really think that's a good idea, Nick?" Dusting the sand off her back with her discarded shirt, she cleaned off a bit before she slid back into it. "I mean, with everything that's been going on at work, ..."

Nick rose and brushed the sand off his body then stepped into his underwear and shorts. "It's the *only* idea with everything that's been going on. For God's sake, Jessie. You're not safe at your apartment. What better place for you to stay than twenty-eight miles out of town on

a security-controlled estate?”

As she dressed, she watched while he picked up his shirt and draped it over his broad shoulder. When he stood before her again, she grinned and said, “It wasn’t very secure today. I didn’t even have to call you to open the gate.”

“That’s because I thought I was leaving just a few minutes after I got here. I only came home to change clothes, but ...” He paused as though he wanted to cover up something he’d almost said. “There was a package in the mail that I got involved in.” Jessie’s stomach growled again, and he grinned as he draped his arm around her shoulders. “Let’s go back to the house and quiet your stomach. I’ll whip up a couple of my famous western omelets.”

“And I’ll help,” she added, sliding her arm around his back. “In the past six years, I even learned how to chop an onion.”

“Wow!” he exclaimed. “I’m impressed. The next thing you’ll be telling me is that you took a gourmet cooking class.”

“Actually,” she returned, “I took two of them—beginner and advanced. Unlike when we first started dating, I can now cook you a meal you wouldn’t believe.”

“Tell you what. We’ll hit the grocery store later, and tomorrow you can make me a believer right here in your super-modern country kitchen.”

Despite their light conversation, Jessie was nervous about going back into the house. She didn’t want to lose the happiness that had finally come over her, and that could happen if she went inside. There were just too many memories of Joe.

But when she stepped through the patio doors leading to the family room, Joe’s ghost didn’t rush to her. Instead, she saw him lying on the sofa in the late stages of his illness. She heard him speak words he’d never said to her. *I knew Nick would make you happy, my love. I just couldn’t tell you, because he was married. Now that you’re together, I can rest peacefully. Nick loves you more than I ever could have—and I loved you a lot. Good-bye, my love. Be happy.*

Joe’s image disappeared as though it had never been there. Of course, it *hadn’t* been there. She’d imagined it. But it had seemed so real! And instead of being upset at having envisioned his ghost, she was overcome with a sense of peace.

“Are you all right, Jess?” Nick asked in concern.

She looked up at him as they stood in the doorway. “Yes, Nick. I’m just fine.”

“You don’t look it,” he observed, pushing her gently toward the kitchen to their right. “You look like you just saw Joe’s ghost or something.”

“I did.” When she glanced at him and saw his expression of astonishment, she giggled.

“Don’t get upset about me seeing things, either, because he’s gone—for good. He says he can rest peacefully now that we’re together. It wasn’t like when I first came in.”

“You saw him then, too?”

“Of course.” She stepped in front of him and stopped, laying her hands on his bare chest. Gazing up at him, she spoke in a smooth, calm tone. “Joe and I spent our life together in this house. There are a lot of memories of him here. But I also have memories of what *you* and I did.”

“That’s what I tried to tell you six years ago,” he declared in a hurt tone.

Smiling, she nodded her head. “I know, but six years ago I couldn’t hear it. Joe’s laughter and my anguish drowned out your words.”

“Jessie, ...”

She laid two fingers on his lips to silence him. “No, let me finish. In the kitchen? *You* and I laughed because I couldn’t even core a tomato.” Pointing to the sliding patio doors, she said, “Over there is where you kissed me for the first time. I thought I would die on the spot I was so overwhelmed by new feelings! And over here.” Jessie led him by the hand to the wet bar in the family room. “Here is where you asked to make love to me. What you don’t know is that I almost agreed. So, you see, Nick? Joe’s gone; he’s finally just part of my past. The memories I have now pertain to you, and *you’re* my present.”

“And your future?” he asked, his tone filled with hope.

Determined to keep his expectations to a minimum, she replied, “That remains to be seen. I don’t want to think about it until we solve my problems at work. I just want to think about the present, where I’m completely happy being with you.”

“I understand. So, what else do you remember about our times in this house?”

“In the library, where you *really* kissed me for the first time. I almost asked *you* to make love to me that time. And I remember the look on your face when we were in the study. That’s where I showed you my diamond before Joe and I announced our engagement at a party. If you’d had false teeth, they would have fallen on the floor your mouth dropped open so fast. That was the first time in this house that you told me you loved me. And when your next words were that you wished us all the best, I knew that you were a true friend—one that I would have for the rest of my life.”

“And you do, sweetheart,” he agreed, caressing her shoulders.

“As long as I’m throwing my memories at you, there’s one more you should hear. It was in the living room, and we were sitting there with glasses of wine—you, Joe, Cathy and me. All of a sudden, you played Pearl Harbor and dropped the biggest bomb in our history. You

and Cathy were getting married.”

Nick laughed. “And *you* had a look in your eyes that could have sunk her as fast as the Japanese sank the U.S.S. Arizona. Until that moment, I didn’t think you had a jealous bone in your body.”

Jessie’s face heated in embarrassment. “Okay, I admit it. I wanted to claw those big, batting blue eyes right out of their sockets. But I didn’t know it was jealousy until years later.”

“How many years?”

With a grimace, she bowed her head. How could she possibly get out of answering? Nick grasped her head and tilted it up gently so as not to hurt her neck any worse. Now she had no choice but to return his direct gaze with a deep blush. Then he laughed again.

“That’s what I thought,” he said, shaking his head. “You didn’t know that’s what it was until *I* put a name on it just now. My God, Jess! You *are* still innocent, and I love you for it.”

His mouth covered hers again. It wasn’t a passionate kiss like the one on the beach, not a kiss designed to excite her. But it was a firm one that showed her he meant his words.

When he released her a moment later, her stomach growled again. He patted it playfully then steered her into the kitchen, where they spent about a half an hour getting dinner. They began eating in silence, but Jessie broke it after several minutes.

“You know, Nick,” she worded, “I believe that God had a Divine Plan behind Joe being gone on business when we started dating. He knew that our lives would be entwined like they are; He knew that we would always be friends. He also knew that I would marry Joe and Joe would die. That’s why most of our first months of friendship were here—so I would have those very pleasant memories when I needed them most.”

“Do you know what I believe, Jessie?”

“What?”

“I believe that He wants us to spend the rest of our *lives* like this.”

Suspicious of his meaning, she studied him as he rushed through his explanation.

“Okay, so I’m *not* the most God-fearing man on earth. Does that preclude me from believing in destiny? And what’s destiny if not what you call God’s Divine Plan?” Laying his fork on his plate, he reached across the table and did the same with hers. Holding both of her hands, he rubbed the backs with his thumbs. “I also believe that Nicky was part of that Divine Plan. He was part of both of us, Jessie. When we created him, *he* created a bond that neither of us are willing to break.”

“Nick,” she started to say.

“Can you honestly deny it, Jess? Can you deny a bond? Can you look me straight in the eye and tell me that you’re willing to break it?”

Tears came to Jessie’s eyes. This was a side of Nick that she hadn’t known existed. It was a part of him, the romantic part, that he’d never let people see—not even her. To avoid answering his questions, she asked one of her own. “Do you think Gary is involved with the missing documents?”

“You won’t get out of this so easily, Jessie,” he said. “I want you to face your feelings—tonight.”

“No, Nick. It’s still too soon.”

He released her hands and picked up his fork again. “Damn it, anyway, Jess. Why the hell can’t you stop denying things? Why do you *do* that to me?”

“I’m not denying anything this time, Nick. I just don’t have the strength to face it right now. Too much is happening in my life.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, you’re probably right. So why do you ask about your boss?”

“Because he really got mad when he found out I was talking to you on the phone today. He practically insisted that I not associate with you. And he called you a womanizer.”

“Oh, God,” he groaned, picking up his plate.

Jessie watched as he took his food into the kitchen and dumped it into the garbage disposal. She hadn’t believed Gary, but obviously the article had been true. Why hadn’t she questioned him about it further? Why had she been swept into romance by Nick? Still, she didn’t want to come right out and ask if the article was true. She wanted him to tell her about it.

To keep from arousing his suspicions that she understood what he was thinking, she taunted him. “What’s the matter, Nick? Cat got your tongue for a change?”

“You know what the hell’s the matter,” he shot back as he spun to face her. “Okay, you want the truth? Well, you’re going to get it—*all* of it. The truth is I never expected that damned article to make it to you. The truth is that I was always very careful about what I said. The truth is that I *never* gave out personal information, because I was scared to death it would get back to you. That’s why nobody knew if I was single or married. That’s why my divorce was never published.”

Laying his hands on the peninsula between the kitchen and the breakfast room where she sat, he bowed his head in shame. “Why do I have to be such a popular writer? Why couldn’t I be one of the many who can live their lives without being hounded by the press?”

“Because you’re too handsome,” she said with a playful grin. “Women all over the country love to read your books. I know, because I’ve talked to women all over the country about you. They all loved hearing about your personal life, too. You’ve never seen so many impressed ladies as the ones I told that I’m a friend of yours!”

“The hell I haven’t!” he exclaimed, his mood not changing. “They’ve been all over me for years. My first book came out shortly after you left, you know, and my picture was splattered all over the back, with an itchy-bitsy blurb about my credentials. Can you believe that? My publisher sold my face instead of my words.”

“Why are you so bitter about it? That’s what got you started.”

“If I’d wanted to be a star, Jess, I would have gone into show business. I sure as hell didn’t expect that I’d have to go to such extremes to protect my privacy as a writer.” He paused to sit beside her at the table. “And do you know what it’s like for a writer living in Hawaii? I’ve been inundated by hundreds—maybe even thousands—of tourists over the past six years. I can’t even walk through a damned supermarket without being stopped by somebody. But, unlike you, I can’t move. I have too many happy memories here.”

“Then how did that article get out?”

“There was a time in my life, about a year after you left.” Again, he grasped her hands, this time a firmness that she sensed was instinctive—like he was desperate for her to understand. “It wasn’t easy for me when you left, Jessie. I went into a real mourning period. My way of coping was to work until I was so exhausted I dropped. And believe me, two espionage books in one year that were completely different was *not* an easy task.”

When he paused, Jessie smiled and laid her hand on his cheek. “Don’t be nervous about explaining, Nick. I’m not going anywhere.”

He flashed her a brief smile. “I missed you, Jess. Desperately. But you know me and my male pride. I couldn’t go running after you and beg you to come back. I’d already done more begging than I ever had in my life *before* you left, and it didn’t do any good. Anyway, one year to the day after our night together I went out and got smashed. To this day, I don’t know how I got home. When I woke up the next morning, I was in your bed—where I’d never slept before—with some woman I couldn’t even remember meeting. I felt so guilty that I ignored my hangover, tore your bed apart, and called the Salvation Army. I put everything outside and bought a new bedroom set for you.”

Stunned, Jessie froze. He’d disposed of the bed where they’d first made love. He’d taken something very precious to her and given it away without so much as a note to warn her. If only it hadn’t been a king-sized bed! Then she would have taken it with her to Washington when she left. Instead, she’d taken the one in the guest room.

Her chest tightened, and her voice cracked with suppressed emotion. “How could you

have done that? Didn't you know what it meant to me?"

"I'm sorry, Jess. Please. You have to understand. I didn't know what I was doing. I was more drunk than I've ever been—before or since."

Emotional pain ripped through her; tears seeped from her eyes, and she accused him irately. "You gave it away! My bed. The one where we made love for the first time. The one where we conceived our son. How could you do such a thing? Did that night mean so little to you?"

"My God!" he exclaimed in shock. "You're more upset about the damned *bed* than the woman. And here I was worried that you'd walk out the door because of *her*. Maybe I can finish my story a little quicker now. There were other women, too, Jess. Most of them were just dates, but there were a lot. And every once in a while, ... Well, let's just say I missed you so much that I couldn't help myself. I kept looking for what I had with you, but I couldn't find it. As soon as that article hit the local magazine, I called a moratorium on chasing skirts. I'd been followed and photographed with seven different women in four months. What that reporter didn't know was that I hadn't slept with a single one of them."

Now sympathy raged through her. It was as though she couldn't control her feelings. Drying her tears on her napkin, she said, "It's okay, Nick."

"And another thing. Not one woman has slept in that new bed. I'm reserving it for a special occasion."

Reaching over, she caressed his neck, ran her tongue over her straight, white teeth, and asked, "For a special occasion like tonight? After all, you promised you wouldn't leave me wanting for more."

"If that's what you want, sweetheart, ..."

She interrupted with a mischievous grin. "I have this uncontrollable urge to find out what that new bedroom set looks like."

She dashed toward the bedroom with Nick hurrying after her. He didn't stop moving until he scooped her into his arms and gently lowered her to the bed. For the first time in their relationship, Jessie took charge. She wanted their lovemaking to be something so special that Nick would never even consider getting rid of the bed.

But she didn't want to take her time, either. She wanted to love him again—to lie in his arms and have him smother her in kisses. Grabbing the hem of his shirt, she pulled it upward until he bent over for her to remove it. Then she unbuttoned and unzipped his shorts to take them and his briefs off him, as well.

While he watched, his desire growing as rapidly as her actions, she scrambled out of her own clothes as she lay sideways across the bed. He bent over and kissed her. She grabbed his

head, pressing it firmly against her face to intensify the caress.

Her tongue explored his mouth, clashing against his. Even the lingering taste of onion and green pepper didn't stifle her desire to consume him.

Using all her strength, she pushed him back then covered him with her body. Her hands scouted the way down his torso for several minutes before her mouth followed suit, over his chest and across his stomach—to his excitement dancing so enticingly before her.

She kissed him then slid her body over him until her lips reunited with his in an impassioned embrace unlike any she'd ever given a man. Finally, she straddled him and let her womanhood devour him.

Nick caressed her breasts, and he pushed her up so she sat on his pelvis. When he did, they inhaled sharply, simultaneously, enjoying the increased arousal his action caused.

Throwing her head back, Jessie let her mind go blank. All she wanted to do now was feel. And she could feel Nick so well as his hands methodically massaged her breasts, his thumbs taunting the nipples into arousal, that she exploded in a climax unlike any she'd ever had.

Moments later, he groaned as he also escaped in the throes of rapture. Several minutes after she rolled off him, he grasped her hands and pulled her to her feet. After pulling down the covers, he helped her to lie down on the bed then lay down beside her, drawing the covers over them.

"Ain't no way I'm gettin' rid of *this* bed," he vowed. "I didn't know you had that kind of passion in you."

"Neither did I," she admitted as she ran her fingertips through the hair on his chest. "I love doing this."

"I love you doing it." He paused to kiss the top of her head. "There are still dishes all over the kitchen and breakfast room."

"I read something about this wonderful new invention called a dishwasher. It's supposed to get all the dried-on food off without you even getting your hands wet. You're the one who said we had a super-modern kitchen. I just assumed that meant even new-fangled gadgets like dishwashers."

Nick laughed. "I get your point, and I'm here for the duration. In fact, you may have trouble getting rid of me."

"It's a good thing that's not the kind of trouble I'm looking for. Now I have another sudden, uncontrollable urge."

"Too soon, lady," he joked.



She punched him lightly in the stomach. "I'm talking about a beach party. Saturday night. Are you game?"

"Not only am I game, I was thinking about the same thing. I got an idea a few minutes ago."

"You shouldn't have been getting ideas, buster," she teased. "You should have been paying attention to what was happening."

"Believe me, I was! The idea was just a flash. I need to meet everybody you work with, and I can't exactly wander into your office. The best way to meet them is to have a party, and not just any kind of party. We need a luau, with the pig in the pit and all the trimmings."

"My thoughts exactly. But I'm not cooking, because I want to enjoy it. We'll have it catered."

"Perfect, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"The guest list. It will have to include Hardy."

"Why?"

"You're engaged to the man, and I want to see how he reacts around your co-workers."

"I'm not engaged to him anymore. You indirectly gave him back my ring."

"Does that mean what I think it does?" he asked, his voice again filled with hope.

"If you think it means that I'm engaged to you, no. If you think it means exactly what I said, yes. I no longer consider myself engaged to Todd Hardy. As far as I'm concerned, he made a mistake he can never rectify. I will never marry him."

"Hallelujah!" Nick shouted as he hugged her. "I thought I'd *never* hear you say that. Now maybe I have a fighting chance."

"The way I feel right now, Nick," she admitted, "it won't be much of a fight. I'm still basking in the glow of your lovemaking, but now isn't exactly the time to make a commitment."

"That's okay. All I want right now is the chance. I've loved you and waited for you for so long that a few more days isn't going to kill me." Reaching over her, he picked up a pad of paper and pen by the phone and began to write on it. "We need to start with a guest list so the caterers will know how much food we're going to need."

As they discussed plans for their party, Jessie had a nagging feeling. Something in her

heart told her that a few more days might do exactly what he had proclaimed it wouldn't—  
kill him!

## THIRTEEN

Rachel raced into Jessie's office. Her eyes were bright with excitement, and she chattered the information as though she'd just experienced something wonderful. "That call's for you, Jessie. And guess who it is. Nick Ramsdale! I can't believe it. I actually got to talk to him on the phone."

Smiling, Jessie remembered Nick's words from the previous night, when he'd announced that he'd never had trouble getting women because they practically swooned over him. Now he had another conquest to add to his list.

Unable to resist, Jessie straightened herself in her chair. "You'll get to do more than that very soon, Rachel. He'll be at the party Saturday."

Rachel gasped. "You mean I'll get to *meet* him? In person? Do you think he'd mind if I bring a book for him to autograph? As soon as I saw his picture in the paper, I went right out and bought the hardback of his first book. The paperback wouldn't do, because I had to have a picture of that gorgeous guy. Although, they do put his picture of the backs of the paperbacks now, too. That's why I started buying them. He's really a good writer."

"I'm sure he'd be happy to autograph one for you," Jessie assured her. "Now, if you'll excuse me, this must be important if he called me here."

"Wow!" Rachel said as she left the doorway. "First it's Todd Hardy, and then I find out you're Joe Nelson's widow. Now it's Nick Ramsdale. Why can't I be lucky enough to know people like that?"

Jessie was still chuckling when she answered the phone. "Hi, Nick. What's up? Other than you making yet another woman very happy."

"What are you talking about?" he asked curiously.

"Our number-one receptionist is in seventh heaven because she got to talk to you on the phone."

"Did you tell her that I'll be at the party?"

"And that put her in eleventh heaven! So, why are you calling? I thought we took care of

business this morning.”

“I forgot to tell you something.” Jessie cringed at the serious tone of his voice. “You need to contact Todd and have him meet you for lunch. And make sure he brings the ring. You’re going to ask for it back.”

“But I don’t want it back, Nick,” she protested. “I told you that yesterday.”

“Just play along with me on this, honey. I have an idea cooking, and I want to see where it will lead us.”

Determined to get answers, she interrogated him quickly. “What idea?”

“I’m not telling you the details, because I know you. You get too nervous in situations like that, Jess. You could too easily blow it. Just play along with whatever I dream up.”

“But how will I know what’s going on if you don’t tell me?”

“You’ll recognize it the second I start my act. Right now I’m not sure what I’m going to do, anyway.”

Jessie sighed. He had no intention of satisfying her curiosity. There was nothing she could do but agree, even if it was reluctantly. “All right, Nick. If that’s really what you want.”

“Thanks, Jess. I was really afraid that you’d be unreasonable about this and I’d have to tell you everything. I really didn’t want to do that, because I didn’t want my plan screwed up because of your nervousness. Now let me talk to your boss.”

“My boss!” she exclaimed in surprised. Then, suspicious, she lowered her voice. “You’re not going to say anything about him telling me about the article, are you? Because I really don’t care about all that.”

“I might say something,” he admitted, “but that’s not the main reason I want to talk to him. And when you get him? Get your beautiful bucket out of the office. I don’t want you to hear our conversation.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t. Now I mean it. Go get him then make yourself scarce. Step out of the office and call Hardy on your cell or something. I need you to set up that lunch date for today.”

“All right. Do you want me to let you know where we’ll be?”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll be too busy to show up, anyway. Just get that ring back.”

“I will. I’ll go get Gary now.”

“Thanks. I’ll meet you at your place when you get off work. I want to find out how things went.”

“Okay. Bye.”

Hurrying into Gary’s office, she announced that he had a call on her line. Gary looked at her, his dark eyes showing his curiosity, and asked, “Who is it?”

“Nick Ramsdale. He called me, because that’s the number he has, but he really wants to talk to you.”

“Why?”

She shrugged as he strode to her desk. “All he’d tell me is that he wants me to leave you alone. I’ll close the door and see if I can get hold of Todd on my cell outside the office.”

“Okay.” As she closed the door, Gary dropped into her chair. “This is Colonel Garver.”

“Nick Ramsdale here,” he returned. “You have trouble in your office, and I want to talk to you about it. Can you meet me sometime today?”

“What kind of trouble?”

“I can’t go into it on the phone, but we do need to talk. Can you meet me at the Kawaiahao Church in an hour?”

Papers rustled in the background, but Nick ignored it. This was a business. Work didn’t just stop because he had called. But the noise did stop. The Gary worded, “Oh, my God.”

Hysteria almost overwhelmed Nick. Jessie had told him that Gary would take the call in her office. She’d also told him that she would work solely on finding the documents until they turned up. If Gary was in her office, so were the files she was searching. Nick didn’t want to think about it. The possibility of it happening again was great, but if Gary had found out there was no telling what would happen next.

Fighting desperately to keep a calm exterior despite his inner turmoil, Nick asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Did you say that we have trouble?” Gary asked.

“That’s what I believe,” Nick replied. “Are you going to meet me?”

“Maybe. First, I need to know more.”

“I’ll tell you what I can, but it might not be much. It’s not very smart to discuss this on

the phone.”

“Don’t worry about it. The phones in this office are installed to prevent conversations that subversives might hear if the phones are tapped.”

“I don’t care,” Nick snapped. “I won’t discuss this over the phone.”

“Then answer my most important question. Have you talked to Jessie about anything important lately?”

“I sure have,” Nick admitted, glad that Gary had worded the question that way. “Just last night we spent a long time discussing our future.”

“And?”

“It’s pretty much up in the air for now.”

“That’s what I thought,” Gary said. “Did you say the Kawaiahao Church?”

“In an hour,” Nick responded.

“The hell with an hour. I’m on my way now. Get there as soon as you can.”

Nick hung up and grabbed the manila envelope and digital recorder off his desk. Something had happened while he was talking to Gary, and he sensed that it had something to do with Jessie. To find out what the problem was, he had to meet the colonel.

Thank God, Jessie’s Mazda was easy to handle. He had no problem cutting the time to town by ten minutes. Approaching the coral block structure, he noticed the clock on the tower read almost ten o’clock. As he pulled into a parking space, a slightly plump man dressed in a uniform paced between two of the four pillars on the front of the church.

Nick breathed a sigh of relief. At least, he hadn’t made a mistake in contacting the man. Even from this distance he could tell that the colonel wasn’t the same man in the photographs. But he refused to let down his guard. It had been far too easy to convince the colonel to meet him. Garver’s words echoed through Nick’s mind—“Oh, my God.”

Getting out of the car, he slammed the door, locking it with the button as he headed toward the stairs. When the officer saw him, he rushed down the steps and met Nick at the bottom.

“Ramsdale?” he asked as Nick glanced at the nametag on the man’s blue uniform.

“That’s right,” Nick replied as he shook hands with Gary.

“Colonel Garver. I don’t have much time,” Gary explained, “so let’s get down to business.

How much has Jessie told you?"

"Everything. She asked me to investigate and find out who's behind this."

"Good idea. You're experienced because of the kind of books you write, but nobody would expect you to do the investigating, either. I want you to stay with it."

"I have every intention of doing just that." Nick paused a moment then started back toward the car while the slightly shorter man hurried to keep up. "It's a little crowded here. Let's talk in the car."

Opening the trunk with car remote, Nick opened it and withdrew the recorder and envelope. Then he closed the trunk, beeped the button to unlock the door, opened the passenger door for Gary, and rounded the car to get in behind the wheel.

"I have some things here you might be interested in," Nick announced, "but first I want to get something straight. What you told Jess about me being a womanizer was a lie. That reporter was underhanded and incompetent. You had no right to interfere in our relationship. And quite frankly, I don't appreciate you butting in to our business, so back off. Jessie's allowed a personal life outside the office."

"Maybe you're right," Gary granted. "It's just that Jessie's like a baby sister to me. She's so sweet and innocent that it's hard *not* to think of her that way."

"Well, stay out of our lives—except professionally." Nick paused for effect, then added, "Which leads me to why I called."

"I see you have a recorder here. I hope that's the message Jessie told me about. I tried to get hold of you several times yesterday and couldn't do it."

"That's what it's for all right. Did Jess tell you that she got sick at work the other day?"

"Yeah, and I told her that I never want her to work there alone again. I didn't even want her to do it Sunday, but she was so worried about that missing document that I gave her permission. So let's hear the recording." Right now, Nick was glad he had sprung for the better answering machine, the one with the battery backup. He pushed the play button, and they listened to the recording in silence. Waiting for several seconds after the end of Jessie's message, Nick pushed the stop button then faced Gary, who stared over at him, obviously shocked by what he'd heard.

"Were those footsteps?" Gary asked.

"That's my guess," Nick replied, "and I've listened to it over and over. I can think of only one thing that would make that kind of squeaky noise—a pair of tennis shoes."

"That wasn't me."

Nick shot his startled gaze to Gary. Why would Gary say something like that? It wasn't like he'd baited the man, not that the notion hadn't crossed his mind. After all, he had as much access to classified information as Jessie did. He was as much of a suspect as anybody else in that office.

Before Nick could question him, however, Gary explained, "Jessie asked me if I'd been at the office Sunday, so I assumed you thought it was me."

"I did," Nick admitted, "but only for a while."

"Have you let Jessie listen to it?"

Nick shook his head slowly. "Not yet, and I'm not sure I ever will. She's too worried about finding whoever's taking secret documents."

"Documents?" Gary asked suspiciously. "Plural?"

"Yes, plural." Nick pulled the one photograph he'd brought out of the envelope and passed it to Gary. "Do you recognize anybody in that picture?"

"Oh, my God! It's Jessie."

"Except I don't believe it is. There are seven pictures of this transaction, and you can never see the woman's face. The man's face is blurred in all of them. That leads me to believe that they were set up. At least, Jess was."

"Do any of the pictures show what's in the envelope he's holding?"

"For all I know, it's empty. But that's not the point I'm trying to make here. Somebody had the pictures delivered to *me*, and I can't understand why. I was hoping you might shed some light on it. Who at the office knows we're seeing each other again?"

"I don't know. Rachel, I imagine. She's the office busybody. She likes to know everybody's business, and we've all just come to accept it rather than try to stop her."

"Maybe you *shouldn't* accept it," Nick suggested. "Maybe *she's* the one passing secrets to somebody."

"Rachel!" Gary exclaimed with a laugh. "That's crazy. She likes to gossip about people's personal lives, but she doesn't even *look* at the information we store. Believe me, she's harmless."

"Well, somebody's giving out documents like candy. Jessie found a second one missing Monday morning. And I suspect that you found another one while I was talking to you on the phone."



“Jessie could be taking them,” Gary said. “I know it’s far-fetched, but it’s possible. We can’t discount the theory. She logged in at least one document. That’s why she’s so upset about it. At least, she’s *acting* like she’s upset.”

“Jess would never do such a thing,” Nick declared in her defense. “You said yourself that she’s sweet and innocent.”

“Yeah. And *I* know from experience in Iraq that it’s the sweet, innocent ones who can really con a man.”

Nick studied Gary, careful to keep a straight face so he didn’t give away the suspicions racing through him. Why had Gary chosen the same words that had been written on another photograph? It didn’t really matter. He’d said all that he was going to in front of the colonel. Not one more word concerning the case was going leak to Garver if he could help it.

“I really don’t have anything else to add,” Nick said, keeping his voice casual. “But I have a few other leads to investigate. If you come up with anything, you can contact me through Jessie. Or call me at home. If you tried yesterday, you already know the number.”

When Nick slid the key into the ignition, Gary got out of the car then bent over it with his arms on the roof. “I’m warning you, Ramsdale. Don’t let a sweet, innocent woman keep you from doing a good job. They aren’t always what they seem to be.”

As Gary closed the door, Nick revved the motor to life then maneuvered out of the parking space. He didn’t like the way Garver was talking. Jessie was too worried to be conning him. Besides, that wasn’t her style. If she was going to stab you in the back, she wouldn’t be sweet. She would let you know in no uncertain terms exactly what was on her mind. Then, when you turned around thinking the tirade was over, she would jab in the knife.

What bothered him the most was that Gary had used nearly the same words as the person who had delivered the package. *You’re being conned*. That’s what the mystery person had written. And Garver had warned him that sweet, innocent women could really con a man. The two phrases could be coincidence, but it didn’t pay an investigator to accept anything as coincidence. He needed concrete proof before he discounted Colonel Gary Garver as a suspect.

\*\*\*

After pulling into a parking space next to Todd’s at Kapiolani Park, Jessie got out of Nick’s RAV4. Todd stared at it in disbelief asking, “Why are you driving that?”

As they strolled toward a large banyan tree, Jessie carried one large bag and one smaller

one. Nick's warning about not confiding in Todd echoed through her mind. She'd tried to tell him that he didn't have to worry, since she wouldn't see Todd again, but he hadn't listened. Now she knew why. Nick wanted her to pretend that she still wanted to marry Todd.

"Jessica," Todd scolded, "you're not paying attention."

"I'm sorry," she said, startled back to reality by the sternness in his voice. "What did you say?"

"I want to know why you're driving a Jeep?"

"It's not a Jeep; it's a RAV4. And it belongs to Nick. I was having some trouble with my engine starting, so he let me borrow his car while mine's in the shop." That was exactly what he'd instructed her to tell everybody. But she wasn't sure why he would care what people thought about her driving somebody else's car. Then again, he did suspect that somebody might have the keys to her car. That was probably behind his reasoning. "You're not upset about it, are you?"

"I'm sure not *fond* of the idea," he admitted. "For God's sake, Jessie. The man's out to take you away from me, and you're letting him do it."

"How can you say that?" she asked as she sat down under the tree. "Didn't I ask you to go home and get my diamond so I can put it on again?"

Todd sat down, and Jessie shook her head. She doubted he would ever do anything that would damage his precious image. He wouldn't even get his suit grass-stained during a picnic lunch. "That doesn't mean he's going to stop trying, and you could succumb to him."

"Nonsense." Jessie passed him the smaller bag and let him pick the drink he wanted while she opened the larger bag and took out her turkey club sandwich and order of fries. When he passed her a drink and straw, she handed him the other bag, saying, "Let's stop talking about Nick. Let's talk about us."

"That's a nice idea. Let's start with why you changed your mind about the ring."

"I realized how much I already miss you." She had to keep her story uncomplicated so she didn't get mixed up later, just like Nick had advised. "It's as simple as that."

"But this was overnight, Jessie. You've never had a change of heart overnight before."

"Why are you making such a big deal out of this?" she asked. "You're acting like you have reason to be suspicious of my motives."

When he caressed her neck, she stifled the urge to cry out. It wasn't as painful as it had been, but her neck still ached. Or did it? Nick had touched her neck when he'd kissed her good-bye that morning, but it hadn't hurt. Yet Todd's touch made her want to cry.

That was it! She didn't want to cry *out*; she just wanted to cry. She didn't like having him touch her anymore. But again, she couldn't let him know that. She had to pretend that she liked the way she felt when he caressed or kissed her. Heaven forbid that should happen! She could never fake liking his kiss now that she and Nick had made love again.

"What's wrong with you today, Jessie?" he asked in concern. "You can't seem to concentrate on a conversation."

She offered him a slight smile of reassurance. "I'm just tired, I guess. I didn't get much sleep the night before last. And I had to spend most of last night trying to convince Nick that I just want his friendship. That wasn't easy, either."

"I imagine not!" Todd exclaimed with a grin. "So now that you're wearing my ring again, what do you think of dinner together tonight?"

"Dinner together?" she repeated. "Tonight?" How could she get out of this? She didn't want to spend any time alone with Todd—not even in a public setting. She didn't trust him anymore. "Well, ..."

"I promise I won't hurt you, honey," he vowed, crossing his heart with his index finger. "All I want to do is make up for what happened the other night."

She smiled at him. "I know that, Todd. And I know that you were just jealous of Nick. Part of it was even my fault. After all, I did let him in—and we did have dinner together. Then he went out for movies, and I let him in again. Come to think of it, I'm probably to blame for everything that happened."

"You didn't have to let him stay."

Seething with anger, Jessie struggled to hide it. How could he possibly blame her for having an old friend over? How could he let her take the blame for him trying to strangle her? No wonder she wanted him out of her life. She couldn't stand the way he put the blame on others.

And it wasn't just her. He did the same thing in his campaigning and his dealings with his colleagues. He always had to have a scapegoat—somebody he could point to and say, "It was because of him." Why hadn't she seen that before? He'd done it in so many press interviews that she'd lost track.

"Come on, Jessie. What do you say? Could I take you to dinner at the Polynesian Garden?"

The Polynesian Garden! That was the same place that she'd gone the night Nick had come back into her life. It was the same place that Steve worked. If nothing else, she would be safe with Steve around, so she said, "Why not? I like the Polynesian Garden. I'll meet you in the bar, since I'm not sure what time I'll get off work."

“All right. Let’s just finish lunch now. And don’t eat too much, because I plan to fill you to capacity tonight.”

Relieved that she wouldn’t have to fend for herself in case of trouble, she replied, “I doubt that I’m ever filled to capacity.”

## FOURTEEN

Todd glared down at the woman. What was she doing in his office? She had to know how risky it was; and if she didn't, she was damned fool.

Striding to his desk and dropping into the chair behind it, he demanded, "What do you want?"

"I see you're on speaking terms with your fiancée again."

Todd's anger turned to surprise. How did this woman know what he'd done during his lunch hour? And now that she mentioned their being on speaking terms, it hadn't been nearly as hard to reconcile with Jessie as he'd expected. In fact, it had almost been too easy. Why? Was she up to something? That was ludicrous. Jessie wasn't the kind of woman who played games like that. No, their reunion was just as innocent as Jessie was.

"What's the matter, Senator?" the woman asked with a chuckle. "Didn't you think I'd be watching you?"

Her tone caused his irritation to return. "I was too glad that she wanted me back to think of anything else. And I remember all too well why I got into this. The problem is I've really come to love Jessie. I don't like being blackmailed, not by you *or* your boss—whoever the hell he is."

"I'd keep my voice down if I were you. We wouldn't want your assistant to hear."

The woman shifted in the chair, crossing one well-defined thigh over the other. Todd examined her shapely body with interest. Today she wore a suit, the skirt of which was very short. As attractive as she was, he thought, maybe he could seduce her into giving up on her blackmail scheme. No, he couldn't do that to Jessie. He really had come to love her, and he had to stay faithful if he wanted to keep her.

"Now let's get down to business," the woman said, drawing Todd from his introspection. "You need to get Ramsdale out of the way. After the incident on Waikiki yesterday, that shouldn't upset you."

"I'm not doing your dirty work, lady," Todd declared. "If you want him out of the way, take care of him yourself. I'm already in deeper than I want to be."

“You’ll do it, all right. You’ve got too much at stake not to. Do you think he could have instigated you getting back with Jessie?”

Todd’s eyes widened. He hadn’t considered that. She had a valid point, but he didn’t want to believe it was possible. He wanted Jessie to have come back to him because *she* wanted to come back. Besides, Ramsdale wouldn’t encourage Jessie to get back with him.

“Are you crazy?” Todd asked, shaking his head. “The man hates me. He would *never* send Jessie back. She came back on her own. I don’t doubt that for a second.”

“Then why is she driving his car?”

“Hers is in the shop.”

“Not true. I know for a fact that Ramsdale’s using it.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do,” the woman replied. “Remember, yours is not to reason why, yours is but to do or die. And what you need to do is ...”

“Nothing is what I’m doing,” Todd declared. “I’m out of this as of this second, so you can leak anything you want to the press. I don’t even care if it means the end of my career.”

“You’ll change your mind. You have too good a reason to keep helping us.”

“What’s that?”

“Two words—Jessica Nelson.”

Todd nibbled at the inside of his lower lip. The woman didn’t have to say another word.

\*\*\*

Sauntering up to the bar, Jessie sat on a stool and watched the man at the opposite end mix a drink. Maybe Todd meeting her here wasn’t such a good idea. After all, Steve was a replica of Nick. She should have met Todd in the lobby, but she needed to talk to Steve before Todd arrived.

When Steve turned around, Jessie smiled and motioned to him. Grinning, he strode over to join her. “Hi, Jessie. How’s the head?”

“Okay, and so is the eye.” She pushed a napkin she’d written on across the bar. While he

glanced at it, she explained, “Do me a favor, would you? I’m meeting Todd here, and I want you to keep your back my way when he shows up. Then I want you to call Nick at my place—that’s the number. Tell him to come right over.”

“What’s going on?”

“We were supposed to have a date tonight, but I have to stand him up.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. If you’re breaking a date, why do you want him to come here?”

“I don’t think I should explain that. Nick might not like it. Please, Steve? Would you just call him?”

“All right,” he said, stuffing the napkin into the pocket of his flowered shirt. “Can I get you something to drink while you’re waiting?”

“How about a Diet Coke?” She chuckled then added, “Although a magnum of wine is probably what I’ll need by the end of the evening.”

Steve got her the soda and asked, “Are you expecting it to be that bad?”

“I don’t know that I’d exactly call it bad, but it could be very interesting.”

“How so?”

“Can’t tell you that, either, scooter,” she teased, using the nickname she’d given him the first night she’d met him.

“Scooter?” a woman quizzed with a laugh. Jessie turned around to see an attractive, blonde dressed in a short, flowered, wrap-around skirt and a bikini top standing beside her. “I’ve never heard you called *that* before.” The woman winked at Jessie. “Actually, I’ve heard him called a lot of names—some of them not very nice—but never scooter.”

“Jessie,” Steve said with a grin, “you were going to meet Peggy Saturday, anyway, so I may as well introduce you now. Jessie Nelson, this is my live-in love Peggy Baldwin. Peggy, Nick’s old flame Jessie. There. The formalities are over. Time for more work.”

“Except I don’t have an order. I just came to see one of the two best-looking bachelors in Hawaii.” Peggy smiled at Jessie. “But I hear the other one’s been taken out of the eligible category, just like this one has.”

Jessie’s face heated at the insinuation. “I wouldn’t exactly say that.”

“He would,” Peggy insisted. “Are you meeting him here tonight?”

“Not quite. Contrary to what Nick Ramsdale thinks, I’m still engaged to Senator Hardy.”

“And speaking of the devil,” Steve interrupted as he nodded toward the door, “it’s time to make myself scarce. Give me your order, Peg.”

“I just told you I don’t have one.”

“Just do it so I have a reason to leave,” he whispered. “The guy’s within earshot, and he really looks suspicious.”

“Time to stop flirting and get me a mai tai and a Jack on the rocks,” Peggy said, playing along with Steve.

“Be right with you.” Steve turned around just in time to keep Todd from getting a good look at him.

Jessie sighed. That had been a close call, and she didn’t want to know what would have happened if Todd had realized that Steve was related to Nick.

“Hi, honey,” Todd greeted, despite his curious glance at Steve. “What’s going on here?”

He kissed her cheek, and she stifled a cringe at the feel of it. She’d thought she would be able to go through with this, but now she wasn’t sure. She couldn’t stand having Todd touch her.

“Just chatting with the bartender.”

“Well, don’t.” Sliding his arm around her shoulders, he gazed down at her lovingly. “You’re taken now.”

As tempting as it was, she restrained an angry retort. But she didn’t want him to think that he could dominate her, either.

“Chatting doesn’t hurt anything, Todd,” she reminded him. “Shall we get a table?”

When the hostess led them to a table for two, Jessie requested one for four. She was still a little sore from an accident, she explained, and needed the extra room to maneuver. After they were seated, Jessie asked Todd if they could start with a bottle of wine to celebrate their reunion. Soon Peggy, who turned out to be their barmaid, served them a bottle of the best white wine that Jessie had requested.

“I must be *too* hungry,” Jessie quipped as she studied her menu. “Everything looks good. I can’t decide what I want.”

“That’s okay, honey,” Todd replied. “We have all night.”



"Maybe we do, but if I don't decide soon, my stomach won't."

"You like their Polynesian chicken."

"I know, but I always get that. I want something different tonight." Reaching across the table, she laid her hand on his arm. "After all, we're here for a very special reason."

Todd patted her hand. "Then we'll just sit here with our wine for as long as it takes you to make your decision."

Nick rushed up to the bar, frantic that something had gone wrong with his plan. "What's going on? Did something happen to Jessie?"

"Jessie's fine. She just wanted me to call you."

"What for?"

Steve shrugged his broad shoulders. "She wouldn't say, but it must be something pretty big. She told me that she'd probably need a magnum of wine by the end of the evening. And she met her fiancé."

The grin returned to Nick's lips. Jessie had set up an encounter without him telling her to, which was good. But it was a little sooner than he wanted one. He would have to move carefully to keep his plan from proceeding too fast.

Steve's voice startled Nick back from his thoughts. "You know what she's up to, don't you."

"Sure do," Nick admitted. "How about one of my usuals?"

Steve poured Nick a whiskey and water then passed it across the bar, while Nick pushed three dollars back at him. "Thanks. I may need your help later, so stay loose."

Nick left the bar and headed toward the foyer. On the way, he saw Peggy and pulled her aside to speak with her. "I'm going to need your help later, Peggy."

"What for?" she asked.

"I can't give you details, but Jessie's here."

"I know," she interrupted in a stern whisper. "She's having a romantic dinner with her fiancé, and you should leave them alone."

"She doesn't want me to," he insisted, "or she wouldn't have had Steve call me. There's probably going to be a little trouble tonight, and I need you to get Jessie out of here before

she can get hurt. Do you think you can handle it?"

"Are you going to start a fight with this guy?"

"I can't tell you any more than I already have. And, no, I'm not going to start anything. I'm just going to set a little trap. I can't go into it, because there's just not time. Will you do it for me or not?"

"This is insane," she grumbled, "but all right. I'll do it. Is there anything else?"

"Nope. Just keep an eye on us. When things start getting a little heated, warn Steve."

"Should I make extra trips to the table?"

"You're their bar wench?" Nick asked, stunned.

"Yeah. Would that help?"

"You bet. Just make sure my drinks are *really* watered down—and I mean just a drop or two of whiskey to discolor the water. Make your first trip in about five minutes. They don't know it yet, but I'm joining them. I'll be done with this drink by then." Nick started away then stopped and looked at Peggy over his shoulder. "And one more thing. Tell Jessie to hightail it out to the estate. I'll meet her there as soon as I can. Tell her *not* to go back to her place."

"Will do."

Turning away from her, Nick took several deep breaths then continued to the foyer, where he requested a table for one. As the hostess seated him, he scanned the room until he found Jessie and Todd. "Hey, I see some friends of mine. I think I'll join them instead. It's okay, isn't it?"

"If they don't mind," the hostess said.

"They won't," he returned with a wave of his hand. "You can go back to your desk. I can cross a room by myself."

"All right, sir. Have a pleasant evening."

Striding over to the table, Nick pulled out the chair beside Jessie's and sat down without being invited. As he draped his arm around her and grasped her shoulder, he planted a wet kiss on her cheek. "Hi there, sexy lady. Fancy meeting you here tonight."

"Fancy," Todd grumbled. "What do you think you're doing?"

Nick glanced at Todd then immediately returned his attention to Jessie. "Joinin' a coupla friends. You don't mind, do ya?"

Glaring at him, Todd said, "We most certainly do. Now get lost."

"Todd, that's no way to act." Jessie was glad that Nick was finally there, but she had to be very careful not to show it. Nick was up to something, and she didn't want to spoil any plan he might have. Smiling at him, she said, "Of course, you can join us, Nick."

"The man's drunk," Todd pointed out, "and it isn't even six o'clock yet."

Holding Jessie's left wrist, Nick made a disgruntled face at the ring on her hand. "The man's got a damned good reason to be drunk. I was hoping some fish had swallowed this thing. Then I talked to Jess this afternoon, and she told me that she took you back—ring and all."

"We just ordered a couple minutes ago," Jessie said to turn the conversation. "I'll bet the waitress would hold our order until you see a menu and have time to decide what you want."

Nick caressed her chin and turned her head toward him. This time he kissed her on the lips. "Yer so sweet." Glancing around, he motioned to the waitress at the table behind them. "You in charge of this table?" When she nodded, he said, "I got here late. Wouldya bring me a menu?"

"I can't believe you're letting him get away with this, Jessie," Todd complained. "We're here to celebrate, and you're encouraging him to stay."

"Celebrate?" Nick asked her. "Celebrate what? Wait a sec. You took back his ring, so that means the engagement's back on. *That's* nothin' to celebrate. *That's* sumptin' to cry about."

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Todd asked.

Nick shrugged and squeezed Jessie's upper arm. "This is my reg'lar hangout. I sure didn't expect to run into you two."

"Could I get anybody anything else?" Peggy asked as she approached the table.

Finishing his drink in one swallow, Nick held up the glass for her. "I'll have another whiskey and water—and your lei."

Peggy stared down at him in disbelief. He was acting like he was drunk, but it wasn't possible. He'd only arrived a few minutes earlier, and he'd seemed fine then. He was up to something that was going to start trouble, just like he'd claimed. Speaking numbly, Peggy asked, "My lei?"

"Sure. You can get another one, cancha?"

"Yes, but ..."

Nick rose and took the flowers from around Peggy's neck. Then, with exaggerated ceremony, he draped them around Jessie's neck and kissed her cheek again. "There. Beautiful flowers for a beautiful lady." Sitting down, he laid his arm on the back of Jessie's chair then glanced up at Peggy and snapped his fingers. "I need a whiskey and water, miss."

Jessie fingered an orchid as Peggy left then spoke to Nick. "You'd better give her a good tip. She could get in trouble for you ripping off her lei."

"Anything you want, darlin'," he agreed, "even if you are engaged to the wrong man."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Todd exclaimed. "I can't believe this is happening. Just who the hell are you going to listen to, Jessie? This drunken jerk or me?"

"Neither," she replied. "I'll listen to my conscience, and my conscience tells me not to make a scene. If Nick wants to stay, I'll let him. And you'd be wise to follow my lead."

Even though she sensed it was dangerous, Jessie loved the game Nick was playing. He kept touching her under the table, caressing her thigh, squeezing it softly or rubbing the inside so seductively that it took all of her willpower not to squirm on the chair. All the time he drunkenly nuzzled her neck or kissed her cheek, while across from her, she could see Todd's fury growing. Any minute he would probably burst into a temper tantrum.

Jessie wasn't sure she liked the thought of that. She liked the idea of two men wanting her, but not having them fight over her. That could be embarrassing—not to mention newsworthy, given the status of the three individuals involved.

Although she made a few half-hearted gestures to stop Nick, he did so only when their soup arrived. Still, he kept his arm on the back of her chair, absently toying with her hair while he ate. Oh, how she wished they were alone!

Todd jumped to his feet. Jessie stared up at him in surprise. She glanced toward Nick, who also appeared startled.

"Get your damned filthy hands off my fiancée!" Todd demanded, his voice far too loud for the restaurant.

"I don't hear any complaints from the lady," Nick returned, gazing into Jessie's eyes. "You wanna lodge one now?"

"She's too polite to complain in public," Todd answered for her. "Leave Jessie alone, or I'll ..."

"Or you'll what?" Nick taunted. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Peggy make her way closer to the table. "Or you'll get out those pretty, shiny Golden Gloves and take me on? I doubt even you could handle me, so siddown. This isn't the time or the place for fightin'."

"You bastard!" Todd shouted.

Todd grabbed the table and toppled it away from Jessie. She squealed in surprise, while beside her, Nick cried out as the hot soup spilled onto his lap. A moment later Todd knocked Nick off his chair and wrapped his hands around Nick's throat.

"Nick!" Jessie screamed in horror.

But Nick was too busy to reply. Sliding his arms between Todd's, he used all his strength to knock them apart. As soon as Todd's thumbs no longer pressed against his windpipe, Nick shouted. "Now, Peg!"

Somebody grabbed her arm and pulled on it, but Jessie fought against the person until she heard the loud crack. She grimaced as blood spurted from Todd's nose onto Nick's face and shirt.

"Come on," Peggy said as she tried to pull Jessie away. "Nick wants you out of here."

Reluctantly, Jessie let Peggy lead her away from the scene. She wanted to be there for Nick, but he didn't want her around. That must mean more could happen than just this fight. When Peggy had her to the door, she gave Jessie Nick's instructions and watched to make sure Jessie left. Then she ran to get Steve to help break up the fight.

"Quite an interesting little trio over there, isn't it," the woman said to the man sitting across from her at the corner table.

"Very interesting, Lisa," the man with blond hair replied. "I'm glad you called me to join you. Did you make it clear to Hardy exactly what he's supposed to do?"

"Sure, but I doubt this is an act," Lisa explained. "He told me that he really did fall in love with Jessie. I have a feeling this is real."

"Real or not, it's accomplishing our purpose."

Lisa shook her head. "I don't like it. He's too involved with her, and he keeps acting like this, he's going to blow it."

"Should we stop him?"

"Nope. We have to let this play out, or we'll be implicated."

## FIFTEEN

Jessie paced the family room of the mansion. Nearly four hours had passed since Nick and Todd had their fight, so where was he? Turning on the television, she hoped to occupy her mind by listening to the news. But still she paced, unable to concentrate on anything except what could have happened to Nick.

Then the anchor the breaking story. State Senator Todd Hardy had been arrested for assaulting Hawaii's most popular author, Nick Ramsdale.

Jessie stopped short and dropped onto the white, leather sofa. Staring at the TV in shock, she leaned forward and watched the familiar figures move across the screen. Todd held a lightweight towel over his nose, but she could still see his two black eyes. His eyes blazed with fury as two policemen, one holding each of his arms, led him away from the restaurant where she'd left the pair.

Nick exited the building next, escorted by Steve and a female police officer Jessie gasped in horror. He looked so pale, so shaken by whatever had happened. His face, drawn in agony, revealed his pain, and he clutched his throat. He'd been injured much worse after Peggy got her out of there. Why hadn't she insisted on staying to help him? Why had she done what he'd wanted when she'd known that he needed her.

"I'm home, Jess!" he called hoarsely from behind her.

Waving him off like she was shooing away a fly, she focused on the news story. According to the reporter, it had taken four men twenty minutes to separate the two. Despite Nick's valiant efforts not to draw out the fight, Todd kept going for his throat. Both men were taken to the hospital, where Todd was treated for a broken nose and Nick for a bruised windpipe.

She stared at the television, too shocked to respond to Nick. After being treated and released at the hospital, Todd had been taken to the police station and booked for attempted murder. Attempted murder! Todd had tried to murder Nick, and she hadn't even stayed in the building.

The anchorwoman cut to the next story.

Nick grabbed the remote and turned off the television as he sat down beside Jessie on the sofa, teasing her. "Fine homecoming for the walking wounded."

“Were you *crazy*?” she asked, studying his neck, which had several bruises on it. Otherwise, he looked much better than he had on television. “He’s a champion boxer, and you picked a fight with him. Have you completely lost your mind?”

“According to many of the patrons at the restaurant, I didn’t pick a fight. They reported that I was just a little too drunk and was hitting on the good senator’s fiancée.” Nick grimaced. “The cops weren’t too thrilled when they found out that I’d had you spirited out of there. They want to talk to you tomorrow. You can do it right before you bail Hardy out.”

“Bail him out?” she repeated in shock. She couldn’t believe they were having this conversation, let alone that he wanted her to get Todd out of jail. “You really *are* crazy. I can’t do that after he tried to kill you.”

“I don’t want the man behind bars, Jessie. I want him where I can find out what he’s up to.”

“Where he can kill you, you mean.”

Drawing her into his arms, he kissed the top of her head then said, “That’s a chance I have to take if I’m going to protect you.”

The security of his embrace again enveloped her, and she leaned against him. She didn’t lie what he was asking of her, and she certainly didn’t like that he’d started a fight with a man who had Golden Glove awards. But mostly, she didn’t like him risking his life to clear her name. Somehow, she had to convince him that he should stop this madness.

“You don’t understand, Nick” she said in a quiet voice “I don’t want you to do this. I don’t want o lose another person I love.”

“Love?” he repeated while he hugged her. “Do you rally love me?”

“Of course, I do,” she replied “You’re my best friend.”

Damn!”

His voice told her everything. He’d hoped she was finally stating her feelings. In a way, she was; but in another way, she was denying them. She just wasn’t ready to call what she felt for him true love, because she still wasn’t sure what that was. Then, to her surprise, he scrambled to his feet.

The sorrow in Nick’s expression touched her heart. She didn’t need him to voice the words in his mind to know what he was thinking—that she was denying her emotions again. She doubted that anything Todd Hardy did to him could be as painful for Nick.

When he spoke, however, he did so as though she hadn’t said anything to distress him. “Well, on to business I have a few things to show you.”

Taking her hand, he escorted her into his study, where he unlocked his file cabinet and took out the photographs. He laid them on his desk for her and turned on the bright desk lamp. "Take a look at these and tell me what you think."

She stared at the top picture in amazement. What was her car doing at what appeared to be a tourist overlook? She never frequented places like that. Laying the picture aside, she went through the remaining photograph and laid the one on top of the first. After several minutes she gazed up at him.

"I know what you're thinking, Nick," she said with a shake of her head, "but that's not me. And I'm surprised that you think it is."

"What about this other personality you talked about?" he asked. "Could it be her?"

"Absolutely not. Besides, I dismissed her almost as soon as I made her up. I got to thinking that, if I really did have a second personality, I sure wouldn't wonder if I did. After all, crazy people are usually the last to admit it—not the first to bring it up. On top of that, my muumuu like this one is almost new I only wore it in public twice. The first time I wore it to an office party. The second time was Monday, because my knees hurt too much to wear pantyhose."

Nick gasped. "Wasn't Monday the same day you reported your car missing?"

"Yes. I didn't curl my hair that day, either. My neck hurt too much. The person in these pictures has curly hair. Not only that, but I can't reach that far across my car. I'm too short."

"That's it!" he exclaimed. He grabbed his throat and groaned. "Damn. I keep forgetting how much it hurts to shout like that. Anyway, I knew something was wrong with the pictures. That must have been it. What about the writing on the back of this one?"

Turning over that photograph, he pointed to the back where he'd scribbled over the indentations.

She read the words and gaze up at Nick as he bent over her with one hand on the desk. He returned her sorrowful expression.

"You don't believe it, do you?" she asked.

"Believe it?" he repeated "Hell, no, I don't believe it. Why would you even think that?"

"You're the one who pointed it out."

The reassurance in his smile eased her distress. "To see if you could identify the handwriting, not to find out if it was true."

"Oh." She studied the writing then returned her gaze to him. "Nope."



“All right.” Nick slid the pictures back into the envelope, stuffed it into his file draw, then locked the cabinet again. Going to a second cabinet, he unlocked it and took a digital recorder from the bottom drawer. After setting it on the desk, he pushed the play button “Now listen to this.”

While she concentrated on the playback, she recalled making the call. Then she heard the receiver fall, a cracking thud, and something else. Nick turned off the recorder.

At that moment, Jessie realized that she’d stopped breathing. She inhaled deeply and turned her gaze on Nick. She hadn’t been alone in the office on Sunday, despite what she’d thought. Somebody else had been there. But who? And *why*?

“Oh, my God!” she breathed, her chest heavy with fear.

“Jessica Nelson,” he scolded lightly. “I’m going to carry around a bar of soap to wash your mouth out if you keep swearing”

“This is no time to joke,” she insisted. “I remember making the call now, Nick. And I remember dropping the phone, because I was so dizzy. That other noise, though. The thud? What was that?”

“It had to have been when you passed out.”

“What was the rest of it? That squeaking.” Not that she really needed an answer. She just wanted confirmation.

“We figure that it’s footsteps.”

“We? Who’s we?”

“Your boss and I.”

“When did you talk to Gary?”

“I met with him this morning that’s why I wanted to talk to him on the phone. We set up a time and place. Now, back to the tape.”

“There’s nothing more to discuss. I remember calling you, but I don’t remember anybody else being there.” A terrifying thought flashed through her mind. “Oh, God, no!” That can’t be true.”

“*What* can’t be true?”

“If somebody was in the office, he or she had to have gotten in while I was out for lunch. When I got back, I had a huge drink of lemonade because I was so thirsty. Nick, do you think my lemonade was drugged to *make* me sick?”

“Why didn’t *I* think of that? I could have had it tested.”

“You still can. I keep forgetting to take it home. It may smell a little strong by now, but I’m sure the water mug hasn’t been cleaned.”

He pulled her off the chair and hugged her. “I love you, Jessie Nelson. Not only are you beautiful, you’re smart.”

Warm sensations spread through her as she recalled their time in each other’s arms. Unfortunately, now was no time to relish in the feelings. They needed to get to the bottom of what happened.

Forcing herself back to the subject, she chuckled. “Or lucky. I’ve *never* left a thermos at work this long.”

“First thing in the morning, I’m driving you to the office so you can get it. Then you’re going to take some time off to bail out Hardy and give the cops your statement. I’ll ask a pal of mine in the department to run some tests on your lemonade. Right now, though, we’ve done enough work for one night. Let me put my recorder away, and we’ll go to bed. I suddenly have this overwhelming desire to ...”

“You’ve *always* had that overwhelming desire,” she interrupted with a giggle. “And do you know what? I’m getting the same one. Hurry up. I’ll turn down the bed.”

\*\*\*

“Now remember, Jess,” Nick said as they entered the police station. “You’re on your own today. I won’t see you until late tonight, so be very careful. Suspect everybody.”

“You mean Todd and Gary,” she corrected.

He pulled her off to the side and let the people behind them pass. “I explained this last night, Jess. You can’t trust Gary, because of what he said to me yesterday. He was too damned close on the wording. As for Hardy. ... Hell, I just plain don’t trust the man, and I don’t want you to, either. But you have to be wary of everybody, not just them, for now. We don’t know *who* the hell is behind all this.”

“You don’t have to warn me about Todd,” she replied with a soft smile. “I haven’t trusted him since Sunday night.”

“Just don’t change your mind.”

“I won’t.” She paused a most, almost afraid to suggest it, but she knew she must—for her sanity. “Will you call me at work and let me know what your friend says? I’ll be a nervous wreck if you don’t.”

“That’s not a very good idea, honey. I don’t want people to think that we’re as close as we are. You’ve told everybody that we’re good friends. Let’s just keep it at that for now.”

“Nick, please. I need to know what you find out.”

“If I promise to call, will you agree to just a few coded words? If the test is positive, I’ll say that the lemonade was too sour. If it’s negative, I’ll say it was just right. And *don’t* screw up what I told you to say to Hardy. It could ruin everything if you so. Now go make your statement. I need to do my work downstairs.”

Jessie waited for Todd’s release. She didn’t particularly want to see him, but she had to. It was the only way to carry out Nick’s plan. Imagine, Todd involved in espionage! That was hard to believe, especially when it came to framing her. Still, the evidence against him was so strong that she couldn’t discount Nick’s theory.

Nick had found the location of the meeting between the woman who had used her car and the man to looked like Todd. After talking to workers in the vicinity, he had learned that the man in the photograph was undoubtedly Todd Hardy. When Nick had asked how they could be sure, the people told him that they’d recognized him from television and newspapers. Before he’d left, he’d gotten their names, addresses, and phone numbers in case he needed them as witnesses in court.

Jessie had to go back to work as soon as she dropped Todd off at his apartment. She hated the thought of that as much as she did the idea of being alone with Todd again. Although Nick suspected that Gary was involved, she couldn’t believe it. How many times had Gary told her that he thought of her like a little sister, like somebody he needed to protect? And if he felt that way, how could he frame her?

With a heavy sigh, Jessie got up and went to the fountain for a drink. When she straightened up, she saw Todd rushing down the hallway in her direction. His nose was covered with a piece of hard plastic held in place by surgical tape, and his eyes were badly bruised.

“They told me what happened, Jessie,” he said hugging her. “I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

“I didn’t do that much,” she replied

“Didn’t do that much! My God, Jessie how can you say that? You talked him into dropping the charges. You even got him to agree to a press interview.”

"I just got him to listen to reason Besides, I couldn't let him destroy your career. You want to go to the U.S. Senate. The only way to clear your reputation was to see that Nick admitted that he'd goaded you into the fight."

"I'm still grateful." Sliding his arm around her shoulders, he escorted her toward the exit.

"There's really no reason to be. It's my future, too, you know." Jessie tried to ignore the revulsion coursing through her. Not having success, she changed the subject. "How's your nose?"

"Broken, but it doesn't hurt too much right now, because of the painkillers. Where did you disappear to last night?"

"Our waitress got me out of there. I guess she was afraid I might get hurt in the fracas. I probably should have stayed, but I was too stunned to do anything other than what she told me.

"Where did you go? I tried to call you, but you didn't answer. I ended up calling my lawyer myself."

"I turned off my cell and drove around. I didn't get home until the middle of the night."

"Did you take the day off?" he asked, his voice filled with hope. "I'm going to. Maybe we could spend some time together."

"I can't. Too much to do at work. We can have dinner tonight, though. I'll fix something special to make up for last night."

\*\*\*

Lisa's tone made Todd want to reach through the phone and strangle her.

"I told you Ramsdale was going to get in the way. Then you went and pulled a stupid stunt like last night. Explain yourself."

Todd couldn't contain his anger. "I don't have to explain anything to you. Besides, Ramsdale dropped all the charges, and he's going to give a press release exonerating me. I haven't lost a thing other than a little pride in my boxing abilities."

"That was no boxing match I heard about. The only boxers I know that go for a man's throat are dogs. You could have destroyed everything we've already gained. Don't let it happen again, or the public will hear about another charge that was dropped. *That* ought to give

your fight last night more credence.”

As much as Todd wanted to react, he knew he couldn't. This woman had power over him, and he had to do what she said, despite his deep desire to cross her.

“Now,” she added, “you're to set up a meeting with Ramsdale, and you're going to be polite and *very* apologetic. Have him meet you Monday afternoon about one—at Jessie's condo.”

Todd chimed in with his own idea. “It would be more realistic if I did it before Jessie's luau at his place on Saturday.”

“Just do your job.”

Furious, Todd warned, “One of these days, I'm going to call your bluff. When I do, you're going to be sorry.”

“Or will *you* be sorry?”

The phone clicked in his ear then buzzed with the dial tone. This scheme was getting out of hand. Somehow, he had to stop it. But how, without endangering Jessie, himself, and their future?

\*\*\*

Shocked to hear Nick's words, Jessie held the phone handset to her ear. The lemonade was sour. *Very* sour, Nick had emphasized. And she was lucky that she'd gotten sick. If that hadn't happened, she would have gotten more arsenic in her system, which could have killed her.

“Let's hope that luck holds up,” she said. “I have a feeling that Todd's up to something, and I don't want to get caught in the middle of it. He canceled our dinner for tonight, claimed his pain medication keeps putting him to sleep. Now I can't carry out your plan.”

“Not your fault,” Nick told her. “Besides, we already know he's up to something, honey. It's just a matter of proving it to the satisfaction of the FBI and the police.” He lowered his voice to a sex whisper. “I'd be happy to keep you company tonight.”

She smiled. As much as she would enjoy having him with her, she was exhausted. “Not tonight, Nick. I want to get some *real* sleep in my *own* bed.”

## SIXTEEN

Friday Jessie called Todd's office and left a message to have him call back if he would be late for dinner at six. When he hadn't called by four, she went home and started the meal. Promptly at six, Todd arrived with a dozen red roses.

Although she accepted them graciously, Jessie couldn't help being cool. She didn't want to be with him; she wanted to be with Nick again. Their reunion was almost as though they'd been separated for six hours instead of six years. After one full day of not speaking to Nick, she missed him as much as she had when she lived in Washington.

What could that mean? she wondered as she and Todd ate a silent dinner. Did she care for him more deeply than just as a friend? Of course, she did! He wasn't a friend anymore; he was her lover.

Jessie almost laughed aloud. In twenty-nine years, she'd never dreamed that she would consider a man to whom she wasn't married her lover. But that's exactly what Nick was. Even more startling was the realization that she didn't feel guilty—only happy beyond words.

"You're awfully quiet tonight," Todd observed when he finished the main course. "Is something wrong?"

"Not really," she replied with a quick smile. "I'm just tired. It's been a lousy week. I'm glad Nick and I decided to have the party tomorrow. Hawaii was the most popular place for R and R during the Vietnam War. I could use a hefty dose of that myself right now."

"What time should I pick you up tomorrow?"

"You don't have to pick me up at all," she explained. "I'm going out early to help get ready. Besides, I have to supervise the caterers, so everything's just the way I want it."

"I could help, too," Todd offered.

"We already have plenty of workers. Nick's brother and his girlfriend will be there, too. So will three caterers. With all of those people, you'll just be in the way."

Todd stared at her in amazement. "Ramsdale has a girlfriend?"

"It's *Steve's* girlfriend."

"Oh," he said, his voice registering his disappointment.

Not knowing what to say next, Jessie took some dishes to the kitchen. When she returned, Todd grasped her wrist. Instantly fear gripped her, and she jerked her hand free. Why did he insist on finding some way to touch her? Why did she react this way every time he did?

Would it be this way with him forever? If so, how could she possibly pull off this charade of an engagement in public? Nick had said it was crucial to his plan that she seem as though she loved Todd. But how could she fool anybody if his very touch instilled such deep fear in her? It would be difficult not to react instinctively to his caresses—if not impossible.

Unfortunately, tomorrow's party would be the most important time to make it look real. She only hoped that she could pull it off when the time came.

"It still bothers you when I touch you, doesn't it," Todd said.

"I can't help it," she returned. "You scared me to death the other night. I can't get over what happened as easily as you seem to want."

"I didn't mean to scare you, honey," he explained, rising to stand before her. "Honest. I just lost control. It will never happen again. I swear it."

"How can I believe that after Wednesday night?" To escape him, she took more dishes into the kitchen. He needed to leave before she blew her part of Nick's plan. Setting the dishes on the counter, she turned toward Todd and said, "I'm tired. Would you please leave? I want to get a good night's sleep before the party tomorrow."

"We should talk this out, darling."

"It's too soon." She paused, desperately searching her mind for a way out of the discussion he wanted. Deciding honesty would be best, she explained, "I'm trying, Todd." *Trying to make it through this evening without blowing everything for Nick*, she added mentally. "That's why I invited you here, but I'm getting more and more tense. Just go home. I can't bear being alone with you another minute."

To her relief, Todd agreed, taking with him the copy of directions to her mansion that she had written down for him earlier. From her balcony, she watched Todd drive away. Then she went inside to call Nick and tell him that she was on her way. What she needed most was to lie in the arms of the only man who could make her feel safe.

\*\*\*

At one o'clock Saturday afternoon, the doorbell rang. Nick faced Jessie with a bright smile and a wink. "Well, sweetheart, it's time to start separating the good guys from the bad guys. Are you ready?"

"As long as you're here to protect me," she replied, nervous about what could happen that day. When Rachel had called that morning to tell her that she couldn't make the party after all, because she'd come down with the flu, Jessie hadn't thought much about it. Now she felt like it was a bad omen.

Last night Nick and Steve had dug the roasting pit for the pig, and she'd felt fine about the party. Early that morning when she'd awakened with Nick, made love, then started cooking the pig, she'd even been optimistic that everything would be resolved that day. At lunch, they'd discussed possible events and how to handle it if something they didn't expect transpired. Even then, she'd been sure that everything would be okay.

But now that their guests were arriving, she had serious doubts. Her stomach that something screamed that something would go wrong. She was as certain of it as she was of Nick's love for her. How could she ever get through this day feeling like she did?

She gazed up at Nick anxiously, and he gave her a peck on the lips before started to the door.

No matter how hard she tried, Jessie couldn't shake the feeling of impending trouble. But she didn't notice anything suspicious. In fact, everybody seemed to get along and appeared to be having a good time playing volleyball on the beach or just making good use of the balmy weather and private oceanfront.

With a sigh of self-reproach, she went into the house to get more ice.

Nick kept a close eye on their guests. He knew something was brewing, because Todd seemed edgy when he was introduced to Gary's wife Lisa. Now that Jessie had gone off to play hostess, Todd escorted Lisa away from the crowd. Discreetly following the pair, Nick moved closer and hid behind a palm tree so he could hear their conversation.

"What are you doing here?" Todd asked the woman.

"I was invited," Lisa returned in a commanding tone. "And if I were you, I'd pretend like you've never seen me before. Things could get ugly if you don't."

With only those words, Lisa sauntered away, so Nick made his way back to the party. He didn't like the sound of their short conversation, and he wanted to warn Jessie. But he had to wait until he could get her alone to tell her that he'd already picked out two suspects.



At two o'clock, Blaine Cooper arrived unaccompanied. According to Jessie, he had no wife and presently no girlfriend. While everyone was playing volleyball, Nick noticed something he'd missed. Blaine was nearly the same height and build as Todd, with the same hair color and similar cut. He was also paying an inordinate amount of attention to Lisa.

Was it possible that Blaine was the man in the photographs? Could he have paid the workers to swear that they'd seen Todd Hardy? That was likely, given the brief conversation Lisa and Todd had had.

About four o'clock, Jessie saw Gary and Lisa disappear into the house. Curious because of Lisa's obvious attraction to Blaine, Jessie followed only seconds later. If anybody questioned her, she would tell them that she was going to the bathroom. By the time she got inside, the couple was already arguing in the living room.

"Don't you have *any* remorse?" Gary asked. "Don't you care that you humiliated me in public?"

"Since when have *you* cared?" Lisa returned.

"Not cared! How can you ask that after everything I've done for you? I've given you the world—and more."

"You haven't given our *marriage* more than a passing thought in over four years," Lisa shot back. "Blaine's very good to me. He treats me with kindness and respect. And he *listens* to me. That's a hell of a lot more than I can say for you."

"The least you could have done was warn me. I brought you here thinking that we were a happy couple. Then in the middle of everything you tell me you want a divorce. You could have mentioned this at home."

Jessie had heard enough. Going back to the party, she sought out Nick and asked him to join her for a few minutes. Curious, he followed her to a spot about fifty feet away from the partygoers before he opened the conversation. "What's wrong, honey?"

"Nothing for us. Lisa just asked Gary for a divorce. And I think I know why."

"Cooper." When she nodded, he shook his head. "I think we've been singling out the wrong kind of people in our investigation, Jess. I overheard a conversation between Lisa and Hardy. They didn't say a lot, but I have a feeling the man's being blackmailed. Do you know if there's anything in his past that could be used against him? I can't imagine that the flimsy information I found could make him give in to blackmail. There isn't even any proof. That's why I wonder if there's more."

"I don't know of anything," she offered, "but I could find out."

Nick gave her a stern expression. "You stay out of that. It's too dangerous. Did you see how much attention Lisa and Cooper are paying to each other? It's obvious that they don't give a damn *who* knows how they feel."

"Of course, I saw."

"Didn't you say that Cooper has the combination and a key to the office?" Nick asked in concern.

"Yes." She glanced around then questioned him in a loud whisper. "You don't suspect Blaine of being the one who was there last Sunday, do you?"

"It's possible, sweetheart. He keeps an awfully low profile. I don't know what it will be yet, but I'm going to do something to draw these people out."

"You're going to expose them?" she asked in astonishment.

"I'm just going to get a better idea of who's into what—if you know what I mean."

"I'm not going to tell you what I'll be doing, either. The less you know, the safer you'll probably be."

Jessie gazed up at him. She didn't like what he was saying. And she was concerned that whatever he was up to could be dangerous. "You will be careful, won't you?"

Gently caressing her shoulders, he gazed down at her. "I'm not going to do anything that might endanger our future. I love you, Jessie. I want us to spend the rest of our lives together, but that won't happen if I die before we're married."

"Kiss me," she whispered.

"I wish I could," he replied with a smile, "but everybody would see. We could blow our entire purpose for this party. Just remember. No matter what happens, I love you—and I always will."

"I think I love you, too, Nick."

"Oh, God," he groaned, grinning down at her to conceal his seriousness. "Now she says it." He slipped his arm around her shoulders and started back to join the rest. "Come on, beautiful. This luau ain't over yet."

"Nick?" Jessie asked from behind him.

As he chatted with Steve, Nick glanced over then returned his gaze to her, staring at her

in amazement. She looked awfully pale. Scrambling to his feet, he questioned her in concern. "Are you all right? You look terrible."

"I love you, too," she said with a mischievous grin. "I fine—just exhausted. It was all I could do to stay awake through dinner. Do you mind handling the party alone for a while?"

"Of course not. You go lie down, and I'll tell everybody that the party's over."

"No. Everybody's still having fun—except Gary. But I suppose we can't do anything about that. I'll just rest for a while and come back when I've got more energy."

"Okay, but if you don't come back by nine, the party's over whether you want it to be or not."

"All right. Good night."

"Night, sweetheart."

Nick glanced at Steve, who watched Jessie leave, questioning his brother in concern. "Do you really think she's all right?"

"Not for a second," Nick replied, watching Jessie stroll away. "I'm tempted to tell everybody to go home whether she wants me to or not. But I'd better wait until I'm sure she's asleep. Otherwise, she'll get up and stop me."

"Tell you what. Peggy and I will help by leaving right now. Once the first couple leaves, it's usually easier to get the rest to go. See you later."

"Thanks a lot, Steve."

Even after Steve and Peggy left, the others stayed to play volleyball. Everyone was having such a good time that Nick couldn't ask them to leave, so he joined in the game. Before long, Todd asked to talk to him.

"What is it?" Nick asked when they were away from the others.

"I want to patch things up with you," Todd explained. "I stayed sober today and saw exactly what kind of relationship you and Jessie have. I know now that I overreacted, but I don't want to go into this in public."

"I've been wanting to get everybody to leave since Jess went to bed. This will give me a good excuse."

"I'd rather do this where Jessie can't overhear us. I feel foolish about the way I've been acting." Todd paused for a moment, as though he was thinking. "I have a key to Jessie's condo. Why don't we meet there in about an hour and a half?"

“Sounds good to me.”

“Thanks. I’ll go on over now.”

Although Nick had agreed to the meeting, he was reluctant. He sensed that Todd was up to something, but he couldn’t think of what it could be. Maybe it had something to do with the missing documents. To learn more, he had to meet Todd.

Even as he explained to the guests that Jessie was sick and had gone to bed, he sensed danger.

Only two nights earlier, Todd had tried to kill him, so it was stupid to meet him alone. And he was somehow involved with Lisa and Blaine. Before he could meet Todd anywhere, he needed to enlist some backup.

Maybe he could call Steve. Nick glanced at his watch. That was out of the question. Steve wouldn’t even be home yet, and he didn’t answer his cell on the road. If only he had a gun! Then he would have some protection in case he needed it. Apparently, the only source of protection he had was Jessie. He would leave her a note explaining where he went then leave it on his pillow. She would be sure to see it there.

\*\*\*

Why wouldn’t Hardy open the door? Nick wondered in concern. He was supposed to be there already. Nick knocked a third time, hoping that Todd was in the bathroom. But instinct screamed that he should run as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

Nick shook off the notion. Running wouldn’t solve Jessie’s problems. The only way he could do that was to play along with Hardy and see what the man was planning.

The door opened about six inches, but Todd didn’t answer when Nick called his name. Again, instinct told him it wasn’t safe, and again he ignored it. He had to help Jessie; he had promised. Nothing else mattered.

He pushed the door open slowly to expose the dark interior of the condominium apartment. Todd was setting him up for a fall. But he was powerless to break the spell that had controlled his every move since he’d heard of Jessie’s problems.

His initial reason for contacting Jessie burst to the front of his mind. He’d completely forgotten it in the joy of having her back with him. Todd Hardy had been arrested years ago—for almost killing his fiancée. Why hadn’t he thought of that before? Why hadn’t he thought of that the night Hardy had tried to kill Jessie? What a ridiculous question! He’d been too

concerned about the woman he loved.

“You in there, Hardy?” Nick asked forcefully to hide his instinctive fear. There was no reply. “Okay, you damned fool, here I come.”

Nick wasn't sure if he was talking to himself or Hardy. After all, Todd wasn't foolish for knowingly walking into a trap—he was. Despite that, he forced himself to move. If he never did anything else in his life, he had to stop this madness against Jessie.

Nick stepped into the apartment. When nothing happened, he dared two more steps. Sudden pain shot through his head, and he dropped to his knees. Then there was something over his mouth and nose. He struggled to his feet, but the taller person held the rag tightly in place.

*This stuff really smells sweet,* Nick thought in his last conscious moment.

\*\*\*

Jessie woke to a dark room. Rolling over, she discovered that Nick hadn't come to bed yet. With a wide yawn, she turned on the light on the nightstand. Then she caught sight of the clock. It was almost four in the morning! Where was Nick?

Jessie sat up to see if there was a light coming from anywhere in the hallway. Everything was dark. Something was wrong. She could feel it. When she turned her head, she noticed a folded piece of paper on the pillow beside hers. Picking it up, she read the note inside.

*Jessie,*

*Remember that I love you more than life itself.*

*I didn't want to do this, Jess. I just didn't have a choice. Hardy wants to meet with me at your apartment, said something about talking out what's been happening. He said he was too embarrassed to talk with you around.*

*Please understand, honey. I have to do this. I have to get these people off your case. If something happens and I don't come back, put me next to our son. And I'll tell you now that I'm sorry to have taken another loved one from you. I know you must be getting pretty tired of it by now.*

*I love you so much, Jess. I've loved you for so long that it feels like I was born*

*loving you. Please forgive me for meeting him if I don't come home. And I pray that God will forgive me if I cause you anymore pain.*

*You'll always hold my heart,*

*Nick*

Tears streamed from Jessie's eyes. Nick had gone to meet Todd, and he was probably dead since he hadn't come back. Now that he was most likely gone, she realized the truth. She loved Nick desperately and had since their first date. Why hadn't she told him? And when she tried, why had she said *I think*? She *knew* that she loved him. She just hadn't known how much until the prospect of losing him stared her in the face.

But she wouldn't know for sure until she went to her apartment. Before she left, she called Steve and told him to meet her there—just in case she was walking into a trap.

## SEVENTEEN

Jessie stared at the door, unable to open it. Something horrible had happened in her apartment. She could feel it. And, thanks to his distressing note, she was terrified that Nick was dead.

Glancing toward the elevator, she wondered where Steve was. Even though he, too, lived out of town, he was a lot closer to the condominium than the mansion was. He should have been waiting for her. Well, one thing was for sure. She wasn't going into that apartment until he got there.

Sitting down, she collapsed against the door to try to calm her frazzled nerves. In only moments it opened, and she fell backward onto a pair of legs. Startled and tense, she squealed and scrambled to her feet, ready to run away.

Steve chuckled. "It's okay, Jessie. It's just me."

Turning around, she flew into the arms of Nick's brother, hugging him tightly and trembling harder than she believed possible for a person to shake. Then she pushed away and questioned him. "Wait! How did you get into my apartment?"

Steve turned sullen. "The door was open a crack when I got here. The light was on, so I thought you'd left it open for me."

"Is Nick here?" she asked. "Is he all right?"

"He's here, but he's not all right."

He gazed down at her for several silent seconds. Jessie couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her instincts had been right all along. Poor Nick! He'd been hurt trying to protect her, and now she had to live with that knowledge for the rest of her life.

Then, before she had a chance to voice her concerns, Steve continued in a rush of words. "He's alive, but he and Hardy must have had a monstrous fight. There's broken furniture and everything. I called the paramedics and the cops. That's why I was opening the door—so they can find your apartment. Wait here a minute."

Although curious, Jessie stayed where she was. If things were in as bad shape as he described, she wasn't sure she wanted to see her condo, anyway. And she didn't want to see what Nick must look like.

A few minutes later Steve called for her to come in. She entered slowly, taking small, tentative steps as she surveyed her home. The farther she wandered into the apartment, however, the less it felt like home.

As Steve had pointed out, her furniture was broken. Some pieces—like the television and lamps, as well as other items—were destroyed. Her gaze fell on the ruined glass coffee table and the familiar green blanket draped diagonally over the toppled couch beside her. Instinct told her to continue scanning the room.

As she did, she saw Steve kneeling on the floor near the toppled dining room table. Before him, she saw first the quilt from her bed then Nick's battered face.

"Oh, my God! Nick!" Rushing to him, she dropped to her knees, heedless of the bruises that were still tender. Taking the damp rag from Steve, she dabbed at the dried blood on Nick's lips. Then she questioned Steve in a voice as tender as her loving care of Nick's wounds. "Do you think he'll make it?"

"I don't know," Steve said. "He's got a nasty gash and lump on his head. It must have happened when he fell against the table."

"Why would Todd do this? Nick's such a peaceful man—at least, he used to be. He always said that fighting never solved anything. I remember him saying that he would *never* fight anybody unless he couldn't talk that person out of it."

"After what happened the other night," Steve reminded her, "that's probably what happened. Nick *had* to have acted in self-defense. There couldn't be any other explanation."

"Explanation for what?"

"Is this the place with the shooting?" a man asked.

Jessie gasped and shot her startled gaze to the policeman standing just in her view. "Shooting?"

"Under the blanket on the couch, officer," Steve said as he rose.

Grabbing his arm, Jessie gazed up at him and repeated her question. "Shooting?"

"There's a gun beside Nick—under the blanket. It must have gone off when he fell against the table. The bullet hit Hardy smack dab in the chest. I figure his heart took a direct shot."

"Todd's dead?" she asked in disbelief.



Across the room, the officer lifted the blanket to examine Todd while Jessie returned her attention to Nick. She was sad that Todd was gone, but she wasn't upset about it like she had been when Joe and Nicky died. Her concern was for Nick. He was seriously injured. No matter what happened, she would stay at his side, just as she had with Nicky and Joe.

Soon the paramedics, coroner, and two plainclothes policemen arrived. Within minutes, the paramedics had done some preliminary work on Nick and gently put him on the stretcher. Jessie watched with Steve's arm draped protectively around her shoulders. As the men strapped Nick down, Jessie asked, "Could I go with him—in case he wakes up?"

The shorter paramedic smiled down at her. "Of course. Your fiancé would like to see you if he comes to."

"My fiancé?" she repeated. Then she remembered the three-carat diamond on her finger. "I have something important to do, but it will only take a second. You go on to the elevator. I'll be right there."

As the paramedics wheeled Nick out the door, Jessie removed her engagement ring. Steve watched with a knowing smile while she took the ring to a policeman near Todd's body. Without even a glance at her deceased fiancé, she placed the ring in the officer's hand and closed his fingers around it.

"You may as well put this with Todd's personal effects," Jessie said. "I haven't wanted it since he threatened to kill me a week ago."

"Are you going to make the funeral arrangements?" he asked.

"I doubt I'll even go to the funeral," she replied. "I've never met them, but I know his parents are Gordon and Esther Hardy. They live on Maui, but I'm not sure where."

The officer examined her suspiciously. "He was your fiancé, and you've never met his parents?"

"I've been too busy," she explained. "Now if you'll excuse me, I want to be with the man that I *really* love." She glanced at Steve as she left. "I'll meet you at the hospital."

\*\*\*

Pacing the waiting room, Jessie listened absently while Steve tried to relax her. It was sweet of him to try to put her at ease, but he should know it wouldn't work. The only man she'd ever truly loved was in an emergency room, his body battered by a man she'd only

*thought* she loved. She couldn't think of anything except how she would cope if Nick didn't recover.

About an hour after the ambulance arrived, a doctor approached them, asking if she was Jessie Nelson.

"Yes, sir," she acknowledged. "Were you Nick's doctor? Is he going to be okay? I can't tell you how worried I've been."

"I'm sure you were." The average-height doctor's green eyes sparkled as he smiled. "And from the way he's acting, he's probably fine."

"*Already?*" she asked amazement.

The doctor chuckled at her reaction. "I don't know Mr. Ramsdale, but I have read a couple of his books. Judging from the way he writes, I'd say that having a hissy-fit because I want to admit him for observation is normal for him."

A mixture of relief and joy swept through her, and Jessie smiled. "That's normal, all right. When can I see him?"

"Now. He's in bay number three. Admission will let you know when they've processed his forms."

"Thank you."

Heading down the hall from which the doctor had come, Jessie found the correct bay and peeked around the curtain. When Nick told to come in, she showed him her left hand.

"God," Nick groaned with a teasing tone, "you're a sight for sore eyes. And are my eyes ever sore!"

Striding to the examination table where he lay, she studied him. His face was severely bruised, and his head was bandaged. When she stopped beside him, she grasped his hand. That was odd. There were no bruises on it to indicate that he'd been in a fight, and that troubled her more than she wanted to admit—to Nick *or* herself.

To relax him as well as herself a little, she kept the conversation light. "Looks to me like you only have one black eye."

Instead of countering with levity, he turned serious, adding to Jessie's concern. "I don't know about any murder, Jess. I swear it. Somebody hit me over the head when I went into your apartment. I went down, and the guy put a rag over my mouth and nose. Dr. Ragland said it smells like I was chloroformed."

"I wondered what that odor was," she said with a wink. "I thought you were trying out a new after-shave. I was going to tell you to change back to the *sexy-smelling* stuff."

"This is serious, Jess," he scolded. "The cops had Dr. Ragland take a paraffin test on my hands and guess what. It was positive. You know what that means, don't you? I could be charged with murder. But I couldn't have done it. Somebody else—whoever knocked me senseless—must have put that gun in my hands then pulled the trigger. I didn't do it, Jess. I swear it. I did not kill Hardy like they think."

"How did you know it was Todd?"

"A cop already talked to me, but I couldn't tell if he believed me or not." He covered her hand with his. "*You believe me, don't you?*"

"Of course, I do," she replied with a smile. "If you were hit on the head, how did you get so many bruises? It looks like somebody beat the tar out of you."

"There must have been more than one person there. I figure the whole thing was set up to look like we'd had a fight. I don't know *what* the hell that cop figures. I'll tell you, Jess. I sure wouldn't want to play poker against him. The man was stone-faced the whole time he took my statement."

A woman's voice from behind her startled Jessie, and she gasped as she turned toward the door.

"You can go up to your room now, Mr. Ramsdale," a nurse pushing a wheelchair said.

"I'd rather go home," he complained.

"Dr. Ragland said you probably can—tonight—*if* you use the time to rest."

"He will," Jessie assured the nurse. "I'll stay with him to make sure." After helping the nurse get Nick into the wheelchair, Jessie leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips. "You do what she says and get some rest. I'll see you later." As they started away, Jessie remembered something she'd meant to say. "Just a minute." The nurse stopped, and both she and Nick gazed over their shoulders at Jessie. "I almost forgot to say something. I love you, Nicholas Ramsdale. Now get some rest."

"After a statement like that?" he teased as the nurse wheeled him out of the room. "I don't know if I can."

When they were gone, Jessie returned to the waiting room where Steve was reading a magazine. Dropping onto the chair beside his, she sighed as she collapsed against it the back.

"How is he?" Steve asked.

Jessie flashed him a smile. "Fine. He's being a pain about staying here, but he's going to."

"You'll never guess who came in while you were with him."

"Who?"

"Lisa."

"Garver?" she asked in shock.

"Yeah. And was she ever in bad shape. She walked in, but her face was bruised pretty bad. It looked like she might have a broken arm—maybe a couple broken ribs from the way she was holding herself."

"Did you get to talk to her?"

"Sure did. Gary laid into her after they got home. She wants to talk to you before she leaves, so don't take off."

"I hadn't planned on it. I was going to the cafeteria while Nick gets settled. Now that I know he's okay, I'm hungry."

Steve laughed. "So, what's new?"

"Smart aleck," she said, playfully hitting him in the bicep. "Now I guess I'll wait here until she's done."

"Unless you want me to keep you company, I'd better get home to Peggy. I wanted all the scoop on Nick before I called her, but I figure she'd rather have me home before we talk."

"Go on. I don't need you now that I know Nick's all right."

Jessie couldn't believe it. Twice in an hour and a half she was visiting somebody in the emergency room. Not only was Nick being admitted, Lisa was, too. According to Dr. Ragland, she had a collapsed lung and other internal injuries.

"Hi, Jessie," Lisa said weakly. "Are you all right?"

Jessie studied her for a moment. Steve hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said that she was in bad shape. Still, she didn't want to upset Lisa anymore than she'd wanted to upset Nick, so she replied in a calm voice. "I'm fine. But why would you ask such a thing?"

"He made me put three sleeping pills in your drink at the party. That's why you had to go to bed so soon after dinner. I was afraid the pills on top of the wine coolers would overdose you, but he made me do it."

“Who?”

“Todd, of course. He wanted you out of the way so he could meet with Ramsdale.” Lisa grabbed Jessie’s wrist. “Don’t go back to work, Jessie. Please. Promise me you won’t go back.”

“I have to,” Jessie said, stunned by Lisa’s plea.

“You *can’t*. You’re a threat now. You have to stay away.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The missing documents. I know who took them. I even helped him try to frame you. I tried to tell him that it wouldn’t work. I tried to tell him that you were too smart, but he wouldn’t listen. He kept insisting that you were innocent, that you’d never suspect a thing.”

“Why would somebody want to frame me? More importantly, *who* would want to?”

“Why? So he wouldn’t get in trouble, of course. But I can’t say anything more, other than that it’s too dangerous for you to go back to work. You can’t predict what will happen next. Even *I* can’t.”

“Won’t you get into more trouble by telling me this?”

“I don’t care anymore. I didn’t want to do this, Jessie. I just didn’t know how to get out of it.”

Jessie examined her for a moment. “Who beat you up like this, Lisa? Was it really Gary?”

“Yes. I want a divorce, but he doesn’t. I didn’t know he was dangerous. He’s never even hinted that he would beat me up if I tried to leave.”

“Is that what happened last night?”

“Yes. We’d already been arguing at the party, but it got worse at home. He left for a while and came home drunk. I was already packing. That’s when I told him that I was going to have Blaine’s baby. He was furious. He hit me in the stomach with an empty suitcase, and I lost the baby. They’ll be taking me upstairs for a D and C as soon as I’m done talking to you. By the way, how’s Nick?”

“Fine, thank you. I’m sorry you lost your child. I know how devastating that can be—even if it was a miscarriage.”

“You know?” Lisa asked.

“Sure. I lost Nick’s child.”

Lisa’s dark eyes widened in shock. “You and Nick had a baby together?”

“That’s right,” Jessie confirmed.

“That’s why he wouldn’t back off.”

“Pardon me?” Jessie questioned.

“He was sent a message to ...”

“Oh, yeah. The pictures. I almost forgot about those. Do you know if that was Todd in them? We couldn’t see the man’s face clearly.”

“It was Hardy, all right. I used his past criminal record to keep him in line.”

Jessie couldn’t contain her surprise. This was something about Todd that she’d never suspected. “*What* criminal record?”

“He almost killed his ex-fiancée when he found her in bed with another man, but somehow he got her to drop the charges. I’ve followed him around lately, too. I even took the pictures and got them developed.” Lisa yawned. “I’d better stop talking now. The pain killer that the doctor gave me is kicking in. Just remember. Don’t go back to work if you want to spend the rest of your life with Nick.”

Jessie avoided agreeing. “Tell you what. I’ll be sitting with Nick today, so I’ll stop by your room later. We can talk more then.”

About one o’clock, while Nick was sleeping and his roommate was still in surgery, Gary entered the room. Waiting until he pulled a chair next to hers, Jessie asked, “How could you do such a thing to Lisa?”

“I was drunk,” he explained in a near-whisper. “I lost control.”

“That’s no excuse. It was despicable to hit her in the stomach when you knew she was pregnant. You don’t know what that kind of loss can do to a woman. It tore me apart when I lost Nick’s son.”

“You and Nick had a son? Is that why he’s been such a bulldog about ...” Gary hesitated before he continued in a casual tone. “... getting back together with you?”

Although Jessie noticed the almost imperceptible pause, she acted as though she hadn’t. Between Nick and Lisa warning her, she now believed she couldn’t trust anybody from the office—including her boss. “He’s always been a bulldog about us. And I’m glad that he was. Ever since I found out that he might have walked into a trap last night, ...”

“A trap!” Gary interrupted in a loud whisper.

“Yes, a trap.”

“I heard that Nick shot Todd. Now you’re telling me that it was some sort of a trap. And I can tell by your voice that you’re not just speculating. How can you be so sure?”

“Nick told me what happened.”

“He regained consciousness?” Gary asked in surprise.

Keeping a straight face, Jessie considered his words. How had Gary known that Nick was unconscious? She’d had the radio in Nick’s room on all morning and hadn’t heard any announcement of the kind. And there’d just been speculation about Nick’s having shot Todd in self-defense.

Jessie hid her suspicions. “Of course. Nick’s not the kind of man that a little bump on the head can keep down for very long.”

“But I ...” Again, Gary paused briefly. “... heard he’d been chloroformed.”

Jessie wanted to shout out that, considering the way he was talking, she knew the truth. The news had not said anything about that. But if she mentioned it, Gary would probably just deny it. Besides, it could jeopardize her chance of getting the proof she needed. Somehow, she had to trick him into tipping his hand, *without* him realizing what she was doing.

“I don’t know where you heard it,” Jessie said, turning her concerned gaze to Nick, “but it’s true.”

“Hospital gossip on my way past the nurses’ station. You know how popular Nick is with the ladies, and those nurses are ladies.” He grinned. “Well, *most* of them are, anyway.”

“How’s Lisa?” Jessie asked to change the subject.

“I don’t know,” he admitted with a grimace. “There’s an FBI man at her door, and he won’t let me in. Only authorized personnel are allowed in her room. According to him, she gave explicit instructions that I’m *not* authorized. Apparently, she doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

“Can you blame her?”

“I guess not. She didn’t tell you why there would be an agent outside her room, did she? I mean, did she do something wrong?”

“Definitely.” To protect Lisa from a man that she now considered dangerous, Jessie added, “But she didn’t tell me very much. She was groggy from the medicine Dr. Ragland gave her.”

“What did she tell you?”

“Just that she was into something she shouldn’t be. I could try to talk to her. I told her that I’d visit her today, anyway. Maybe she’ll confide in me.”

“Would you?”

“Sure.” Jessie patted Gary’s hand and continued with a reassuring smile. “I’ll see how she’s doing and get in touch with you as soon as I can.”

“Stop by my place at the hospital’s dinnertime,” Gary suggested. “That way you won’t be away from Nick any longer than necessary.”

“I’d be glad to. You go home and try to relax.”

“Okay. Thanks for your help.”

Not three minutes after Gary left, a man in a business suit entered the room with a concerned expression. He, too, pulled the chair up beside Jessie before she started the conversation.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

“My name’s Detective Cooley, Mrs. Nelson,” he explained. “I talked to your boyfriend when he was in emergency.”

“I see. The nurse gave him some painkillers a while ago, and he’s napping right now. You’ll have to come back.”

“That won’t be necessary. I just wanted to tell him that he’s no longer our prime suspect. The team I have going over your home didn’t find any evidence to contradict his statement. In fact, we feel that we can corroborate it.”

“How so?”

“When we were there the first time, we thought the gun had gone off when he fell against the table. We were thinking of charging him with involuntary manslaughter. The second time we came up with some new evidence. It’s definitely his blood on the edge of the table, Mrs. Nelson, but there’s not one strand of hair—his or anybody else’s—to show that he hit his head.”

“Then you believe him?”

“Absolutely. There’s something else that contributes to our theory, too. We found a fingerprint that doesn’t match any others in your apartment. It could be from another intruder.”



“It wasn’t Steve’s, was it?” she asked, hoping her suggestion would help.

“Steve Ramsdale’s? No. He came down to headquarters when I called and let us take his prints. His are in your apartment, but they don’t even come close to matching that stray print. Do you have any idea who it could belong to?”

Jessie shrugged, not sure she should bring up her suspicions since she had no proof to back them up. “Not an inkling.”

“Do you have any theory that could show somebody set up the fight scene?”

Even though Jessie wanted to hide the truth, she knew she needed to be honest. “Well, yes, but it’s only a theory. I can’t prove anything. The first thing I’m not sure you know about is that Nick doesn’t have bruises on his hands that would indicate he was in a fight.”

“Dr. Ragland mentioned that in his report. He also reported that he believes that Mr. Ramsdale was chloroformed.”

“Then you have all the medical proof. But you probably aren’t aware that I work in a top-secret office, with top secret documents. So far, I’ve found out that three of them are missing, and I’m only halfway through the files.”

“Do you think this could have something to do with your job?”

Jessie nodded. “It’s possible. Nick and I have proof that somebody’s been trying to frame me for spying. We just aren’t sure who it is.”

“Do you think it’s somebody in your office?”

“I don’t ...” She stopped short and stared at him in amazement. “Wait a minute! I have an idea. Would you mind if we continue this conversation later? I want to run over to my office and do something.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to say yet. Let’s see.” She glanced at her watch. It was nearly one-thirty, and she still had a few things to do before she could talk to him again. “I’ll need at least five hours.”

“Just to go to your office?”

“I need to do something else, too. On second thought, let me go to the office then meet you at the station with something I want you to keep. That should be no more than an hour. Is that better?”

“Much.” Detective Cooley rose but didn’t put the chair away as Gary had. “I’ll see you in about an hour.”

As soon as the detective left, Jessie wrote a note to Nick. Then she went to Lisa's room to talk with her for a while. As Jessie had suspected, Lisa disproved the accusation she made. That left only one other prospect. And all Jessie had to do was find a way to get a full accounting of what had happened at her apartment.

## EIGHTEEN

Anger flooded through Nick. “Jessie knows who did it? And you didn’t find out where the hell she was going after she dropped the fingerprints off at your office? You just let her walk out without so much as an explanation? What kind of damned fool are you?”

Detective Cooley shook his head. “I didn’t *let* her walk out. I tried to stop her, but it didn’t work. She wouldn’t tell me anything—not a word.”

“That’s no excuse. You could have ordered her to stay put.”

Nick stalked to the closet and took out his clothes while the detective chuckled. “Order Mrs. Nelson to do something she has her mind set against? You’ve *got* to be kidding. I don’t know her, but even I can see that she’s not the type to listen to orders. Now what are you doing?”

After stepping into his jeans, he buttoned and zipped them. Next, he took off his hospital gown and tossed it onto his bed. Finally, he slid into his Hawaiian shirt and buttoned it. “The HPD’s not doing a damned thing, so I’m going to find Jessie.”

“Are you crazy? You can’t just walk out of a hospital.”

“If I want to walk out of the hospital, I’m sure as hell going to do it. But I’m *not* just walking out. I’ll tell the nurse at the desk to get Dr. Ragland to discharge me. I’m fine, and I won’t let my woman walk into the same kind of trap that I did.” Nick glanced at the stunned detective over his shoulder as he strode out of the room. “Well? Are you coming with or not?”

While Detective Cooley hurried after him, Nick strode to the nurses’ station. Speaking to the woman behind the counter, Nick insisted that she call Dr. Ragland and have him bring the release papers. Then he added that it was an emergency and that he would be in Lisa’s room for a while.

When he arrived, Nick spoke to the man who blocked his entrance. “If you’re who I think you are, get in that room and ask Lisa if she’ll see Nick Ramsdale and Detective Cooley. It’s important that I talk to her.” The man opened the door and poked his head into the room, asking Lisa if she wanted him to let Nick in. Then he turned back toward the two men and nodded his head silently while Nick spoke, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “Thanks a bunch.”

“How are you, Nick?” Lisa asked in concern as soon as the door closed behind him and the detective.

“Furious, but fine,” he answered. “I’m really sorry about what happened to you, but I don’t have time for small-talk. Jess told me what happened to you—and why. She went to the office then left some stuff with Detective Cooley here and took off. I have a feeling she went to meet your husband.”

Lisa’s eyes widened in horror, and she gasped. “Stop her! She can’t be alone with him—not even for a second. He was awfully mad last night. He said he was going to kill her if she ever talked. I warned her not to go to the office again. I *told* her it was too dangerous.”

“I know Jessie pretty well. She may be hardheaded and naive, but she’s not stupid. She’d never meet the man where there’s no escape. She has enough sense to make sure it’s a public setting—someplace she knows well enough to get away if necessary. I need to know if there’s someplace they have in common, where they both might feel comfortable. Where does Gary like to hang out during his off-duty hours?”

“Punchbowl National Cemetery,” she replied. “His father’s buried there. And he loves to take the charter boats out to the Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor. He says the peacefulness there relaxes him.”

“That’s probably a little *too* public. Besides, she couldn’t get away from him there. She’d be stranded, with the boat being her only escape.”

“I guess Waikiki would be too public, too, then. Let’s see. Where else did we go on weekends? It’s been so long since we’ve gone on an outing together that it’s hard to remember.” When she paused to concentrate, Nick and Detective Cooley waited for her to continue. “He likes the parks and botanical gardens. But I suppose ...”

“The botanical gardens!” Nick exclaimed. “I’ll bet Jessie met him at Liliuokalani Garden. She loves that place so much that she used to go once a week. I don’t know if she still does, but I wouldn’t put it past her. She must know her way around there as well as she does her own mansion. Thanks, Lisa. You’ve been a big help.”

When they were in the hall, Detective Cooley grabbed Nick’s arm to stop him. “Where are you going?”

“To Liliuokalani Garden, of course. I have to save Jessie.”

“You can’t leave until you get your walking papers. Let me call headquarters and send a couple squad cars over to see if they’re there first. What kind of car does she have?”

“A red Mazda RX7,” he replied, knowing that he had no choice but to listen to the detective. “But she might be driving my RAV4.”

“License plate numbers?” Detective Cooley requested as he took his pad and pen from his shirt pocket. Nick told him the numbers then waited impatiently while the policeman called the office from the nurses’ station. When the detective returned, he said, “Let’s wait for your release papers in your room. My office call as soon as the car cops find out if either car is at the Garden.”

“I suppose that would be quicker,” Nick acquiesced. “All right. Let’s go upstairs.”

\*\*\*

“What took so long?” Jessie asked when Gary got out of his car. “You’re almost an hour and a half late.”

“I got involved in something and lost track of the time,” he replied. “Did you get to talk to Lisa?”

“Yes,” she replied as she started down a path with him at her side. “She’s awfully upset, Gary. Surely, you can understand that.”

“No. I can’t.”

“You took away her child.”

“It wasn’t *my* child. I know because I’m sterile. We found that out years ago when we tried to have children of our own. Do you know whose baby that was? Blaine’s!”

“That isn’t the problem. You killed part of her. You hurt Blaine a lot, too. He was devastated when I told him about Lisa being in the hospital.”

“You talked to him?” Gary asked.

“And he’s very upset about the loss of a child that Lisa hadn’t even had time to tell him about. I guess she just found out about it a couple days before our party.” She paused to gaze up at him. “It’s going to be a long time before she can forgive you—if *ever*.”

“It’s really that bad?” he asked.

Jessie shook her head in disbelief. “You’re not stupid, Gary. In fact, you’re very intelligent. You should *know* the answer to that.”

“I suppose I do, but that doesn’t make it easy to accept. You don’t know what I’ve done for that woman—trying to make up for not being able to give her children. That’s what she

wanted more than anything else, you know. Children. I've given her everything else—a BMW, a condo on a private beach, expensive clothes. But none of it was good enough for her. She had to have a baby, so she seduced my friend and co-worker." He stared into the lush greenness of the Liliuokalani Garden. Jessie followed his gaze, listening for a moment to the brook that they were approaching. But she shot her startled gaze back to his face when he exclaimed, "Damn! I should have used *him* instead of you."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, forcing a curious tone into her voice to mask the fear seeping into her body.

At that moment, they came to the small waterfall in the middle of the rocky stream. There they stopped, unable to go farther without crossing the water. Gary gazed down at her with a small smile. His eyes took on a look that Jessie had never seen and couldn't decipher.

"I'm glad you wanted to come here, Jessie," he said.

Her instincts screamed for her to be wary, to weigh the advisability of every word. "This is one of the most peaceful places in Hawaii, Gary. I don't care what island, either. This is by far the most relaxing place I know. It seemed like the best place to discuss your difficulties with Lisa. This is really hard for me to talk about—because of Nicky. Being here makes it easier." She gazed back up at him. "What did you mean about using Blaine instead of me?"

"I suppose I could tell you," he replied, taking out a long, hunting knife.

Jessie had never seen anything as evil looking as that blade, serrated on one side and honed to a sharp point. Where he had gotten a knife like that was beyond her, but she could vividly imagine it slicing into her body. She shivered at the thought.

Then Gary's harsh voice brought her attention back to his face. "I'm glad you have a healthy respect for my friend here. Now, we have a deal to make."

"What kind of deal?"

"Your life in exchange for you doing something for me."

Keeping calm wasn't going to be easy with a threat like that, but maybe she didn't need to. If she did, he might suspect that something more than discussing his marital problems was happening. Then she could really be in trouble. When she continued, she tried to gauge his reaction to her words. "What?"

"You take the fall for me. You go to prison instead of me."

Jessie stared at him in shock. She'd tried to read in his eyes what he might be thinking and had failed. She hadn't even considered that reply. "How can I do that if I don't even know what's going on?"

"I think you *do* know."

"I assume this has something to do with those missing documents at work, but that's all I know. And I assume it has something to do with Todd's death and Nick's beating. Don't you think I should have the whole story if I'm supposed to confess? At least, I assume that's what you're getting at here."

"That's it," he admitted grandly.

"Then you'd better tell me everything. If you don't, the authorities won't believe me."

"Good point." Without lowering the knife, Gary began to explain. "Even a colonel doesn't make enough money to give a wife the things I gave mine. I was over a hundred thousand dollars in debt. That's why I had to take matters into my own hands."

"You should have thought of that before you started buying her all those expensive things."

Gary stepped closer, brandishing the knife before her. Unable to restrain her fear, her eyes widened in terror. Instinctively, she stiffened. Her mind reeled with the prospect of Nick finding her slashed to ribbons by the hideous weapon.

"Shut up and listen," Gary ordered. "I took those documents because nobody would suspect you. You're too sweet. And they wouldn't suspect me, because I'm the boss. That's why I always took the documents that *you* logged in—not the ones Blaine did. Now I know I should have taken his instead. Anyway, people start to wonder when somebody's as squeaky clean as you are. They start to say, 'Hey, maybe she's hiding something.' That's why I decided on you."

"Surely, you didn't do this alone. I mean, *I* couldn't have."

"It looks that way in the pictures Lisa mailed to Ramsdale. It looks like you were giving your fiancé the documents."

"I guess it does look like we were in cahoots. But how did you get those pictures? Lisa said that she took them, so she couldn't have played the role of me. Who did?"

"The office gossip."

"Rachel?" she asked in amazement. "That's hard to believe. I mean, she's almost as much of a goody-two-shoes as I am."

Nick stifled a laugh. Despite the danger she was in, she was still using clichés. Then again, that was Jessie. If she wanted this meeting to seem real, she had to act the way she normally

would. He was glad that he'd run into Blaine while trying to find Jessie, too. It made him feel more secure knowing that she had used her head and gotten him to agree to help her. And he had a rifle to protect her if necessary.

As far as Nick knew, the police were still trying to find Jessie. That made it his and Blaine's mission to handle matters. Their quick discussion had produced a plan that could not only protect Jessie but get all the information they needed as well. All he had to do was wait until just the right moment to make his presence known.

"I gave her a cut," Gary was saying. "Government secretaries don't make much, you know—especially a GS-4. She's due for a five in a couple weeks, but she could still use the money. Of course, I knew when I hired her that I might be using her for this little project. That's why I chose a receptionist with hair about the same color as yours and about your size."

"Wasn't it risky to let her in on this?" Jessie asked. "After all, she does have a nasty tendency to let her mouth work overtime, and that *can't* be safe for your plans. She could already have told somebody without even realizing it."

"I didn't tell her what was in the envelopes she was passing to Hardy—or why I wanted copies of your keys."

"So *that's* how she was able to get my car that day. Nick knew right away it wasn't me. He just couldn't figure out why. I had to point out that I'm not as tall as the person in the picture."

"I didn't think it would be noticeable."

"Of course, it was. You had her standing right next to my car. I could see the height difference in a second." She paused a moment, unsure how far she should go. Then she remembered that Blaine was there to protect her, so she continued, knowing that he could stop Gary any minute. "Since I'm going to the pen, anyway, would you tell me something?"

"That depends on what it is."

"Were you in the office last Sunday? Were you the one Nick heard walking on the tape?"

"Yes."

In that instant, rage replaced fear, and she narrowed her eyes in anger. "You could have killed me with that arsenic! How could you do that to me? You just said that you were trying to frame me. Using arsenic was a risky way of handling the matter."

To her amazement, Gary looked shocked. "I didn't think I'd used that much. I swear it.



Why would I want to kill you if I was setting you up to take the fall?"

"Who knows *what* you were thinking? Is there anything else I should know? Like how Todd died? The police already know that Nick didn't do it. They said the angle of the bullet was wrong, and they found out that Nick's injury had been faked. He hadn't fallen against my table like they'd originally thought."

Lowering the knife, Gary's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Are they still investigating the murder?"

"The detective didn't say," she explained, calming a bit when the knife was at his side, "but I imagine they are. You did kill Todd, didn't you? And you made it look like Nick did it."

"I did, but that's not what you're going to tell the police. Sooner or later they'll find the silencer in your condo and the bullet *Nick* fired into your couch."

While Nick watched in disbelief, Jessie moved with lightning speed to kick Gary's arm. The knife in his hand flew into the foliage. Before she could react, he grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back. Pulling her against him, he wrapped his free arm around her throat.

Fear gripped Jessie, choking her lungs, just as Gary's arm choked her throat. Her terrified cry seemed to come from her heart in an instinctive burst of air. "Blaine!"

But Blaine didn't respond. Instead, Nick rose from behind his bush, demanding, "Let her go, Garver."

When Gary tightened his chokehold, Jessie gasped for breath, grabbing his forearm with her free hand. "Never. If I go down, I'm taking her with me. Now back off."

"It's no good, Gary," Blaine said from behind the pair. When Gary started to spin around, Blaine raised his rifle to his shoulder. "We have it all on tape. Now let her go."

"Are you bugged?" Gary demanded of Jessie. "Is that why you're wearing that muumuu?"

Jessie's voice crack, but she answered boldly, knowing she was safe. "I had to protect myself. The voice-activated recorder is in my car, and this is about the limit of the transmitting power. That's why I brought us here."

"Damn it!" he exclaimed, pushing her into the water. "I didn't think you were *that* smart."

At the same time Jessie cried out in pain as her back hit a rock, Nick called out her name. Gary started toward another bush while Blaine cocked his weapon and shouted for Gary to stop. Nick raced to Jessie's aid, wading into the water to lift her gently and carry her back to

land. A shot rang out, and Gary stopped instantly.

As Nick carried Jessie to shore, she gazed over at Gary. "You shouldn't have done it, Gary."

"I thought I could get away with it like I had in Nam, but you're a lot smarter than that Asian whore. You were too determined to prove yourself innocent."

"It's called survival," she said as Nick set her on the ground. "There was no way I would go to jail—not for you or anybody else." Two police officers appeared from the bushes, each grabbing one of Gary's arms. "Come on, Nick. Let's get out of here and give the tape to our friend the detective. I'm sure Cooley will be glad to have his murderer's confession."

Nick gazed down at her. "First I need to know if you're okay. You took quite a bump on your back."

Smiling back, she replied, "I'll be fine. It's just another bruise to add to my list. Let's get out of here."

"You'll be sorry for this, Ramsdale!" Gary called after them as one of the officers cuffed him. "I'll take you *both* down with me."

Draping his arm around Jessie, Nick glared at Gary over his shoulder. "The only person who's taking this lady anywhere is *me*, and the only place I'm taking her to is the altar—as soon as possible."

Jessie stared at the diamond. Tears of joy came to her eyes. It was the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen in her life! And why? Because Nick had given it to her. Across from her, Nick spoke, his voice shaking from nervousness.

"Please, Jess," he pleaded as he knelt beside her chair in the restaurant that same night. "Say something. I know it's only a half a carat, but I couldn't afford more when I bought it six years ago. We'll exchange it first thing tomorrow if you want to."

"No!" she exclaimed, drawing the attention of other patrons in the Polynesian Garden to them. "I don't want another one. This is the most beautiful ring I've ever seen. And do you know why?" She turned her gaze to Nick. "Because it was bought and given out of love. It means more to me than any other diamond ring I've ever been given. You know, all that glitters isn't necessarily gold. There's more glitz in your heart than anybody could ever find in a jewelry store."

"Then you'll marry me?" he asked hopefully.

Tears spilled onto her cheeks. "Oh, Nick, of course, I'll marry you."

The couple at the next table began to applaud, which prompted others in their vicinity to join in. Nick glanced around and blushed, then returned his gaze to Jessie. "That must mean my whirlwind romance worked."

Giggling, Jessie took his hand in hers and laid the ring in his palm. "I'd hardly call eleven years whirlwind, but the last ten days have been marvelous. You do need to do one more thing, though."

"What's that?" he asked.

"Put that on my finger. Just remember one thing, though. Once you do, you're mine. No more trysts with your adoring female fans."

"Not a single one," he vowed, sliding the ring onto her left ring finger.