

# Madder Blue

*A dangerous shade of romance by*

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## CHAPTER ONE

The moon took her breath away.

Luminous in a hazy sky, it floated above her – a perfectly full face with a Mona Lisa smile. Amazing the sky could hold such a moon. But maybe some things could only be seen at three o'clock in the morning.

She shivered, pulling the coat tighter around her, as bright lights from a passing car swept through the street. When the car hit a dip in the road, the light bounced directly onto Nikki St. James' face. She lifted a hand, shielding her eyes from the glare. Barely breathing, she watched the car turn the corner and speed away. Her nerves were totally shot. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face her work.

The entire wall of a construction site was covered with copies of a single photograph. It was a strong image that assaulted the viewer over and over again. A thief had been caught ripping the purse from his victim's arm. The woman's face was twisted in a scream of fear and frustration.

Nikki's photograph showed the young woman falling headlong toward the cement sidewalk, with her wrist entangled in the purse strap. There were two words boldly printed at the bottom of each page: FLESH RED. One hundred copies of a thief's face were now plastered in the neighborhood. Would anyone even notice?

With a helicopter hovering nearby, Nikki gathered her things, ready to go home.

Then she heard an engine coming up fast, and was already moving before the car rounded the corner. Hiding in a space between buildings, she watched as headlights hit her wall of photographs.

The police cruiser skidded to a stop, doors flying open.

Nikki ran as fast as she could between buildings in the dark, headed for the street.

Suddenly caught in the sweep of a searchlight, she glanced up. The helicopter was right above her. When she got to the street, a squad car was bounding in her direction. With no place to run, Nikki stopped dead in her tracks.

The car roared straight through the intersection, its sirens wailing. When the helicopter followed, Nikki found herself alone in the dark.

*Damn!* She needed to find a more respectable way to show her work. Whoever they were searching for was a much bigger problem than the cops.

Running across the street, she made a quick right and her car came into view. A classic Citroen, the color of butter, that car was so old it was cool again.

Nikki hadn't realizing she was shaking until she tried to unlock the door. Out of nowhere, a large cat pounced into view and she let go of the keys.

"Sammy! You scared me, you bad boy."

With her heart pounding, she dropped to the ground.

*Crap. Where were those keys?*

Reaching under the car, she heard noises all around her. Then just as she felt panic clutch at her heart, her fingers brushed against the small bundle of cold metal. Nikki reached out and pulled the keys to her.

Unlocking the car, she jumped into the driver's seat and immediately locked the door behind her. Safe inside with the cat curling up next to her, Nikki put the key in the ignition.

"What would we do without our keys?" she asked, as the engine started. "We live among strange and dangerous people, Sammy. We need locks to protect us."

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, Nikki walked into her apartment with the cat trotting in behind her. Pushing the door closed with a foot, she dropped her keys onto a table. The apartment, a large studio, was furnished with a big bed and a couple of overstuffed armchairs.

She kicked her shoes off on the way to the kitchen, then grabbed a bottle of sake and poured some in a pan to heat on the stove.

It was astonishing the way life changed. A few years ago, her world was turned upside down by things beyond her control. So she gave herself a fresh start. Kept her clothes and the car, but sold everything else to get the money to move cross-country.

Now here she was with a place of her own – a place to call home.

In a moment of supreme confidence, she had taken the apartment that first day, not sure she could actually afford it. Just south of Sunset, but significantly east of Fairfax, the place was a little run down. It was an older neighborhood. But with young families living here, how bad could it be?

That had been almost a year ago.

Turning the light off, Nikki carried her thermos and cup to a small table next to the window. Sammy jumped up on the sill, waiting while she opened the shade.

With moonlight washing over her, Nikki filled the little cup with sake. It was a holdover from her years with Jake, when their big night out was sushi at a Japanese restaurant. *But that was another lifetime.*

She lifted the delicate cup to her lips. One tiny thread that forever linked her to the past, giving her peace in the present.

Gazing down at the street, Nikki was surprised to see other people up at this hour. Across the way, under a streetlight, two men were leaning against a dark red Jaguar.

“Somebody’s slumming,” she said, rubbing the cat’s thick fur. “With that car as a down payment, you could probably buy a house in this neighborhood.” Nikki grabbed her camera, using the zoom lens to bring the two men closer.

Only one of them was facing her – the smoker. He looked young for the grey that peppered his short brown hair, and he was wired with energy at four in the morning.

She framed a shot with the cigarette dangling from his lips. *Click.*

His pupils were so dilated that the only color Nikki saw in his eyes was black. There was something about the man’s restlessness that made her uncomfortable.

She was pulling back to get a longer shot, when he tore the cigarette from his lips and flicked it to the ground, crushing it under his foot. When his voice rose to a dangerous level, the other man stepped away from the car.

The second man, the taller of the two, shoved his friend back against the Jaguar and held him there. Even though he was angry, this one was in control.

Nikki focused her lens on the new man, seeing him under the streetlights for the first time. The dark hair framed a lean, handsome face with very good bones. But it was the spark in his brown eyes that made him remarkable.

*Click.*

As she brought the man into tighter focus, he suddenly glanced up. Nikki didn't know what she had done to attract his attention, but somehow he had sensed a presence. He was alert now, searching her building.

When his dark eyes paused at Nikki's window, she stopped breathing. The man was looking straight at her.

*Click.* She took the picture and jumped back into the safety of her room. With her hands shaking, she put the camera down and leaned against the wall, trying to catch her breath. There didn't seem to be enough oxygen in the air. Standing perfectly still, she closed her eyes.

Life was gently balanced now, but it took hard work to keep it that way. Tonight something changed. Nikki could feel it – a shift in her very foundation. Goose bumps were rising in ripples across her skin. Hearing a car's engine, she stepped back to the window just in time to see the Jag's taillights disappear down the street.

*What if he had seen her? What then?*

Stretching out across the bed, she steadied her hands to pour sake into the tiny cup. She drank it down, and the familiar warmth spread through her. After a second cup, she rolled onto her back, closing her eyes. Everything else dropped away.

The bed was so wonderful. It was soft and big, with piles of pillows to fall back on. The queen was enough for her. Buying another king would have meant there was plenty of room for a man. Four years ago that had seemed a betrayal. But things change.

They have to if you're going to survive.

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER TWO

The sounds of a city in full swing roused Nikki to consciousness. She kicked the covers back, and looked down to see that she had fallen asleep in her clothes. *Oh no, something new to worry about.*

Just as she flipped onto her stomach, there was a thump on the ceiling. Nikki groaned into her pillow.

The thumping came again.

“Okay. I’m up.”

Another thump.

“Matthew, enough!” she shouted, and glanced at her clock. She had slept half the day away.

But the thumping continued until she fell out of bed, hobbled over to the kitchen, and got the broom. Using the handle of the broom, she thumped back.

Silence.

“Thank you.”

Heading out into the hallway, she struggled up the stairs to the landing. Tapping twice on the door, she let herself in to the apartment directly above her own. The door opened to reveal a large studio space that was basically the same as Nikki’s, except that hers was barely furnished, and this one was packed to the bursting point.

Nikki squinted in the sunlight that was streaming through the windows, her hair a jumble of burnished gold.

“Are you moving out?” she asked, with a mind not yet awake.

“Heavens, no,” Matthew answered, “I’m organizing.”

There were boxes and trunks in every corner. End tables were piled with books and faded theatre posters, and a mountain of stage costumes covered his bed.

Standing in the midst of it all was her upstairs neighbor, beaming at Nikki as though nothing pleased him so much as seeing her. Matthew’s round spectacles sat slightly askew on the bridge of his nose, and his thinning hair was smoothed neatly back.

In a faded red robe, the sash tied snugly over his ample mid-section he guided Nikki to a chair, and sat her down at the kitchen table.

She looked exactly as she'd looked rolling out of bed – barefoot, in her favorite jeans with the knees worn thin, and an ancient white tee shirt. Slumped back in the chair, she stared into an empty coffee cup, waiting while Matthew filled it.

As Nikki sweetened the coffee, her eyes searched the table. “Cream?” she asked.

Matthew lifted a section of newspaper and a pitcher of cream appeared. “You slept through breakfast,” he said, pouring cream into her cup.

“I was up all night developing film. Got some great shots though,” she said, still a little drowsy. “I'd love some toast if you have it. I'm starving.”

“One day it might be nice to be invited down to your house.”

She managed a smile. “What? You'd like to cook in my kitchen for a change?”

“Ah!” Matthew laughed. “Your mind is stirring. My job is done.” He put a plate of toast in front of her. “You need someone to take care of you.”

“I have someone, Matthew. And you're the best mom a woman could have.”

“Thank you, but you know that's not what I meant.”

“Here we go again,” she said with a mouth full of toast. “I'm having a little trouble this morning. Please be kind.”

“What time did you get in last night?”

“Didn't check the time,” she admitted.

“If you think it's safe out there, it's not. Read the papers.”

“Do you have the paper?”

“It's on the table in front of you.”

She pulled the paper over, skimming the headlines. “I think something happened last night. I saw a helicopter with searchlights looking for somebody. Did you read anything about it?”

“What time was that?”

“Three o'clock.”

“In the morning?” he asked, shocked. “That's my whole point! You live alone. You keep ungodly hours...”

“Could we have this conversation on another day? I can’t eat with a nervous stomach.” Pushing the paper away, she pulled a tattered theatre program out of a pile in front of her and changed the subject. “You never told me you played *King Lear*.”

“Well, there were so many roles over the years.”

“What was your favorite?”

“*Tartuffe*,” he said, after a moment of thought. “It was 1989. I played it like Bob Hope. Hysterical. I saved the show. Before I walked on, the audience was leaving in droves.”

To look at the two of them it seemed an unlikely friendship. But somehow it worked, and it was an unusual day when they did not spend time together.

“Will I ever get to see you act?”

“I’ve been out of it too long, Nikki. I’d have to start over, I’m old for that.”

“You’re not so old.”

“I’m fifty-eight, and that’s pretty old to hustle a job in Hollywood.”

“Fifty-eight? That is old.”

“How lovely,” he said, raising his eyebrow at her. “We’ll talk about this again in twenty years. You won’t think it’s so old then, believe me.”

“Sure I will. I’m thirty-two and I already feel like that’s old,” she told him, touching the napkin to her lips. “Thank you for breakfast.”

“You are most welcome,” he said, smiling. “Where are you off to today?”

“I’m going to stop by the studio and see what’s going on.” She stood up, looking down at her clothes. “Do these clothes look okay? I’ve worn the jeans a lot lately.”

“Let me take a look. Can the jeans stand on their own two feet?”

“What?”

“When you take them off, can the jeans stand alone? That’s the rule for me. Until then, I just keep wearing them.”

Nikki looked into his face for a moment, raising her eyebrow back at him. “Your fashion savvy staggers the mind.”

“And there’s more where that came from.” Matthew began to clear the table. “It’s going to be windy today. You might want to take a jacket.”



\* \* \*

It was the middle of October and the sun felt warm on Nikki's back, a dry breeze keeping her cool. With a huge shoulder bag slung over one arm and a camera strapped around her neck, she was working her way through the crowd – aware of someone's cigarette smoke settling on her.

Turning onto a side street, Nikki left the crowd behind, and headed straight for a photography studio in the middle of the block. She tried the door, but it was locked.

Crossing over to the other side of the street, Nikki stepped into a graphics house.

"Hey, there," she said, walking past the young man at the front desk.

"Morning, Nikki," he said, glancing up with a confident smile. "I'm still counting the minutes."

Nikki stopped, and turned back to him.

"How old are you, Derek?"

"Age is in the mind, beautiful."

Leaning forward, she rested her arms on the counter.

"I bet you're not old enough to drink legally."

"Come on, Texas, don't break my heart."

She angled her head, gazing down on him. "What did you call me?"

"Texas?" he said uncertainly.

"Don't call me that again."

"Jeff calls you that and you laugh," he protested.

"Well, we're obviously going to have to have a talk about that now."

"Don't get me in trouble, Nikki..."

"You're not in trouble. Relax." Shouldering her bag, she started toward the back of the shop.

He couldn't resist. "So when are we going out?"

Nikki laughed. "You're very cute."

"Cute is good," he said. "It's a place to start."

"Start by finding someone your own age, Derek!"

Stopping in front of a closed door, she knocked once and walked inside the room.

“Hi, stranger,” she said.

The woman at the copy machine turned around with a smile. “I was hoping I’d see you one of these days.” A brunette in her mid-thirties, Lisa stood five feet ten inches tall, with a pretty face and a robust body. “So, what’s up?”

“The studio’s closed,” Nikki told her. “Have any idea where Jeff is?”

“Yeah, he flew to San Francisco last night.”

“Why? He just decided to go?”

“He’s got a fashion shoot, honey.”

“No!” There was outrage in Nikki’s voice. “He was supposed to call me.”

“He did. Several times,” Lisa explained, patiently. “You can be hard to reach.”

“Damn. When’s he coming back?”

“He’ll be home tonight.”

“I cannot believe this.” Nikki sighed. “Were they paying for an assistant?”

“He didn’t say. But you know what? You need to get a cell phone.”

“Then people can reach me every second of the day. I’ll have no privacy.”

“That’s true. But if you’re ever in trouble, you can call somebody and get help. It’s not safe out there.”

“I don’t know, Lisa. I’ll think about it.”

“Better think fast,” she said. “A man and woman were shot to death last night, sitting in their car at a stoplight a block away from you.”

“What time was that?”

“They’re saying 2:30.”

“My god, I was there,” Nikki said, startled. “With a helicopter circling over me and cops all over the place!”

“What in the world were you doing?” Lisa asked.

“Putting up the FLESH RED posters. What do you think I was doing?”

They looked at each other.

“That’s kind of scary,” Lisa said slowly.

“Yeah...”

“Maybe next time, you should call me before you go out.”

“Maybe I will.”

As Lisa led the way across the hall, she opened the door to her office letting Nikki go in ahead of her.

“Derek, we need coffee,” she yelled toward the front desk, “A fresh pot, please.”

When Lisa walked into the office, she closed the door behind her.

“What a day,” she said, collapsing next to Nikki on the sofa.

“I know the feeling. And I just woke up an hour ago,” Nikki said, pulling a large manila envelope out of her bag. “Can you take a look at something for me?”

“Sure,” Lisa said.

Nikki spread a series of 8x10 photographs out on the coffee table in front of them.

“This is the work I shot last night. I’d like to know what you think.”

Lisa eyes were immediately drawn to a disturbingly attractive man, standing under the streetlights, looking up at Nikki’s window.

“I want that guy in my bed,” she said, quietly.

It was uncanny, but he seemed to be staring directly into the camera’s lens.

“Is this your street?” Lisa asked.

“It’s the view from my window.”

“I thought I recognized it,” Lisa said, taking a closer look. “What’s the story?”

“I don’t know yet,” Nikki said. “The prints are rough. I need more time to work on the negatives, but something’s going on.”

Lisa couldn’t take her eyes off those photographs.

“So, what do you think?” Nikki asked.

“Seriously?” she asked, and then answered the question. “I think these guys are intense and you’d better be careful, because they know where you live, Nikki.”

“Not a problem,” she insisted. “They have no idea who I am, or what I look like.”

“So far,” Lisa said, still focused on the two men, “You’re right though. There’s definitely something here. Rough or not, you can feel it. Edgy and unstable, soaked in that beautiful light – all of it moody as hell. Jeff needs to see these.”

“I know. It’s just hard to get his attention when he’s working.”

“Not for you, Nikki. All you have to do is ask.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Stepping out the door of the graphics house, Nikki was hit by a gust of wind. It whipped the hair into her face, making it difficult to see where she was going. Luckily, she was walking away from the wind instead of into it, but still.... She pulled the flannel shirt tighter, holding onto herself and the shoulder bag with her camera inside.

As Nikki rounded the corner, she picked up her pace, running to beat the storm. Only half a block to go and her lungs were stinging. *God, she was in terrible shape.* Close enough to see her building now, she pushed harder.

Looking ahead, she could see Matthew standing on the stoop with his head back, letting the winds blow over him. She breathed air into her lungs, and met him at the top of the steps.

“What are you doing out here?”

“I’m feeling the power of the wind,” he shouted. “Isn’t it spectacular?”

“Yeah,” Nikki said, raising her own voice to be heard, “Can we enjoy it inside?”

“We can try.”

Matthew took a last look at the wind-swept street and followed her inside.

\* \* \*

“Listen to that,” Nikki said.

They could still hear the wind howling on all sides of the building, testing the windows and doors while they sipped hot tea, content.

“There’s something very comforting about being warm and cozy inside when there’s stormy weather.”

“Mm,” Matthew agreed. “I love the tea, by the way. It’s excellent.”

“Thank you. It’s the one thing I do well in the kitchen, which is kind of embarrassing. But I never really learned to cook. I always thought of it as a man’s job because my dad cooked all our meals. Of course in Texas they fry everything, including the vegetables, so it probably wasn’t the healthiest food. But it was tasty.”

“Did Jake cook?”

“Jake?” Nikki hesitated. “He was a steak man. It’s cattle country, you know.”

“That’s what I hear! Where did you meet him?”

“It’s a long story, Matthew.”

“I’ve got nothing but time,” he said, and smiled.

“Ah,” she said, nodding. “Okay...”

Nikki ran her hands through her hair, resigned to it.

“We met at a stoplight in Mesquite, Texas.”

“Really?” he asked, surprised.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “Jake was there for the rodeo. I’m not sure why I was there. But I do remember sitting behind the wheel of my father’s silver Oldsmobile waiting for the light to change – when a red, flatbed Ford pulled up. The cowboy behind the wheel looked over at me, with these beautiful blue eyes coming up under the brim meeting mine. It was a very courtly, cowboy gesture. Respectful, but showing he appreciated a fine-looking young woman when he saw one.”

She sighed, lost in the memory.

“It was the most romantic thing I’d ever seen. Something so simple, and yet...that was Jake.”

“Describe him for me.”

“Tall and good-looking, with a hard body and big calloused hands,” she said, with a laugh. “He had thick brown hair, and those wonderful blue eyes.”

“Don’t stop talking. I love this.”

“Jake rode the broncos, you know. He was something. The best I ever saw.”

Nikki smiled, the pride shining deep in her eyes.

“After we were married, I spent time on the road with him. I think that’s when I got serious about photography,” she said. “I took hundreds of shots easily, and was proud of every one of them.”

“I’d love to see those.”

“So would I,” Nikki said. “But I can’t find the negatives, and I gave all the prints to the cowboys.” She leaned forward, running a finger across her chin. “Didn’t quite realize what I was holding in my hands at the time. Being young, you know, we moved

around a lot. And those guys took such a beating.” She winced at the memory. “It’s a hard life. I don’t begrudge them a thing.”

“Sounds like quite an experience though.”

“Quite an experience...”

She closed her eyes, stretching an arm back over her chair.

Outside, the wind had died down a bit. Inside, the room was warm and peaceful.

“Want to take a walk down the block later, and see what the wind shook loose?”

“Sure. I’m game,” Nikki said.

“What about dinner?”

“Aren’t you cooking?” she asked.

“Heavens, no. We’ll order pizza,” Matthew said, “And let them deliver it.”

\* \* \*

It was dusk as they ventured out for their walk. The palm trees had gotten a good cleaning by the winds. Massive fronds littered the ground, making driving difficult. They walked past Nikki’s car, finding it covered with leaves and debris, but not damaged.

The twilight seemed especially crisp then, and though the winds’ wreckage was all around them, the air itself felt cleaner. As they walked down the sidewalk together, Matthew brought them back to their earlier conversation.

“Jake St. James,” he said. “That’s some name.”

“Jake Tucker,” she corrected. “St. James is my maiden name. I kept it. A modern woman can keep her own name now, you know.”

“The cowboy didn’t have a problem with that?” he asked.

“The cowboy was an interesting man – a very complicated individual. Maybe that was the attraction. He was a law-abiding gentleman, with a lawless spirit that was unlike anything I had ever seen before. For a long time I wasn’t sure that I’d ever get over him.”

“I’m sure his looks didn’t hurt.”

“What can I say? I’m a visual person.”

With her hand on the camera hanging around her neck, she turned to look at him.

“That’s why I’ve always got my camera with me. Moments are ephemeral. You catch them, or they’re gone.”

A gust of wind swept through the street, lifting the hair away from Nikki's face.

"Do you feel that?"

"The wind?" he asked. "It's just a breeze really."

Nikki's head was tilted back, her senses attuned to the air around her. "No. It's something else." She looked at him. "You know how they describe the center of the storm – that period of calm?"

"You mean the eye?"

"I think that's what I'm feeling. This is the calm before it hits again. The storm isn't over."

She turned around, and there it was again.

"Matthew, are you sure you don't feel anything?"

"I'm sure."

"Well..." She shook her head "Maybe the storm's in me. I guess time will tell."

"Let's go home," he said.

"Hold on a minute." Nikki moved him toward the streetlight, angling his body so the light hit his face. "Humor me," she said, and smiled. "Do you mind?"

Intensely focused, she pulled the camera to her eye, and took several shots.

"Thanks, Matthew. I don't have any pictures of you."

Nikki turned away from him, but her words continued.

"I had so few photographs of Jake, I couldn't believe it. What was I thinking?" She threw her hands up. "I wasn't thinking. That was the problem. Everything lasts forever, right?"

Nikki watched banks of clouds pass swiftly over the moon.

"In the first year afterwards, I was relentless, punishing myself for having so little of him to hold onto."

Pursuing thoughts with her heart pounding, the words tumbled over each other.

"You just never know do you? You worry. You plan. Strategize. Give in, and fall in love. Then your future dies on a highway in the middle of Nowhere, Texas, going a hundred miles an hour in the dead of night, listening to Paula Cole singing 'Where Have All The Cowboys Gone?' on a CD you gave him for his birthday...."

Nikki stopped, no breath left in her body.

Matthew was so startled he couldn't move.

She looked up at him, eyes brimming with tears. "I should have been there to slow him down. If I'd been there, Jake would have paid more attention to the road."

"Dear Lord..."

"He was too crazy on his own! I could have saved him."

Matthew reached out to hold her. "It wasn't your fault. You know that don't you? Another death would have made it worse," he said, "Not better. There are tragedies in life, Nikki. Some things cannot be stopped."

She pushed away, wiping her eyes with the bottom of her flannel shirt. "Part of me knows you're right," she said, embarrassed, offering a tentative smile. "That was awkward. Sorry. I thought I was pretty much over all that stuff."

"I'm the one who insisted you talk about it," he said. "I didn't know. Honestly, I thought you were divorced. I feel terrible."

"Listen to the two of us." She exhaled a laugh, struggling to pull herself together. "Let's just stop apologizing. It's over. I'm fine."

"Are you really fine?"

She nodded, sighing deeply. "It was a little embarrassing, falling apart like that. But you know what? I'm glad I told you."

When she looked at him again, the smile was back. And it was genuine. When she spoke, her voice was strong.

"It's time, Matthew. It really is. I have to let him go."

\* \* \*

Lying in the center of her bed, Nikki stretched out long and wide, aware of the emptiness at the tips of her fingers and toes. Then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, filling every particle of her being. It wasn't so bad, really. There was something very centering about solitude.

When she felt warm air on her face, she opened her eyes and saw Sammy looking down on her. "I'm going to be alright, Sam, don't worry. It's just you and me, huh?"

Nikki knew there were things she needed to deal with, and now was as good a time to start as any. Tomorrow would be a clean slate.



\* \* \*

The man was standing across the street, in almost the exact spot he'd stood the night before. His young face looking noticeably older, more fitting for the brown hair shot through with grey.

He was feeling better than last night and pretty much in control now, with a fresh smoke dangling from his lips. It was a nasty habit really, but it got him through the crazy times, calming him down a bit and keeping his mind focused.

But the fingers were constantly running across his scalp, spiking up the short hair. The restlessness seemed a near constant state for him. And with nothing to see now, he was losing what little patience he had.

Ripping the cigarette from his mouth, he tossed it to the ground and headed down the street. Moving at a good clip, he was soon swallowed by darkness, leaving nothing of himself but a pile of cigarette butts – one of them still glowing on the sidewalk where he'd dropped it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Nikki was back on the street by lunch time the next day, lost in a flow of people and feeling strangely comforted by it.

The clean-up crews must have hit the ground running, because the main streets had been cleared of all evidence of last night's windstorm. If she had not witnessed the aftermath herself, she might have questioned whether it happened at all.

Nikki paused at a bus stop, resting the shoulder bag between her feet while she stripped off her sweater, tying it around her waist.

Swinging the bag back onto her shoulder, she glanced across the street – her eye drawn to a strikingly attractive man. *My god. It couldn't be.* Camera in hand, she brought the subject into tighter focus.

Well, she wasn't totally crazy. The dark hair was long enough, and his face in profile was lean with very good bones. But she needed to see him full-on.

Impulsively, she jumped into the street and darted through traffic, arriving safely at her destination. It was a little Italian eatery named Ristorante Nuti. The guy she was checking out was sitting at the window table.

Nikki covered her eyes with sunglasses, and planted herself in a group of well-dressed business men, who were standing in front of the restaurant talking. Each of the five men discreetly checked her out, waiting for the valet to deliver their car.

But Nikki was oblivious as she stood facing the window. She could see the table perfectly, and could almost smell the fresh basket of hot Italian bread, as a waiter served a late lunch of cioppino. Behind her, the group of men got into their car. And that left Nikki standing by herself, directly in front of the window.

As her eyes lifted, she froze. It *was* her man. She pulled the sunglasses away to see him more clearly. Then, suddenly, he turned and looked back at her. There was a palpable force to him, pushing at her.

All Nikki's instincts told her to run. Instead, she held her ground – and he took her in. His eyes traveled from top to bottom and back again, lingering on her mouth.

There was something about that look that left her weak in the knees. Without intending to, Nikki found herself smiling. She was feeling positively reckless today.

With great clarity of thought, she brought the camera to her eye and began taking pictures. It was so unexpected he didn't react immediately. When she saw his face changing through the lens, a frown settling between his brows, she knew her time was up.

*Damn.* Taking one last shot, she turned and ran.

\* \* \*

Reaching out for a line that stretched the length of her bathroom, Nikki clipped the photographs up to dry.

She had worked straight through dinner, barely noticing the hunger, as she stepped back to look at a face so photogenic it was almost obscene. She had never photographed anyone like him.

Even his clothes were beautiful. He wore a classic gentleman's suit made of fine grey wool, with a black silk shirt and no tie. His shoes were probably handmade.

*Who was this guy?* She slid down the wall to the floor, and leaned back. *Whatever could he be thinking behind those dark watchful eyes?*

Nikki didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Here she was, looking at the best work she had done in her life, and there was one thought continuously running through her head – how would she find him again? It was going to be a problem.

Nikki sat for a minute in silence. Then, pulling the phone to her, she pressed the first button on speed dial. Stretched out on the cool tile floor, she waited through the answering machine's instructions until she heard it beep.

"I hear you're in San Francisco having fun without me – just little you and all of those poor, pathetically unattractive models." Nikki smiled, imagining him listening to the message later. "You lead a tough life, Jeff. But if you get in tonight at a decent hour, could you give me a call? I have some questions regarding privacy laws that I'm hoping you can answer." Changing positions, Nikki's tee shirt rose up and her bare skin suddenly touched the cold tiles. "I'm awake now!" She laughed into the phone. "Give me a call."

\* \* \*

When the soft tap-tap on the door went unanswered, it was quickly followed by a knock. Nikki just rolled over in bed. But hearing a second knock, she pushed herself into a sitting position.

It was morning. The last thing she remembered was dozing off on the bathroom floor, waiting for the phone to ring. Registering the third knock, Nikki got out of bed and walked over to answer the door.

A very attractive blonde man stood in her doorway. "My, my," he said with a grin, "Aren't we a beauty first thing in the morning."

Nikki covered her face with her hands and groaned. "Oh my god, Jeff, how did you get in the front door?"

"Matthew buzzed me in. I told him I wanted to surprise you." He looked down at her and his heart lifted.

"What are smiling at?" she asked.

"You. I like your jammies. Do they have anything like that in my size?"

"You're making fun of me."

"Never," he assured her.

Nikki was wearing her red, cowboys-on-horseback, pajama bottoms with a well-worn, white tee shirt. They were her favorite nightwear, and had been washed and worn so often they were falling apart.

"Go away," she said.

"I just got here. Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"I don't think so. What time is it anyway?"

"It's ten thirty."

"Already?" she asked, looking at him, surprised.

Jeff came in, closing the door behind him. He was handsome in a clean-cut, wholesome way. But when Jeff smiled there was a hint of mischief that gave him character, and earned him another look or two from the bad girls. Always fun to be with, he would say just about anything to get a rise out of Nikki. He just loved to see her feisty.

Today he was dressed in his usual low-maintenance style. In deference to the cooler nights, he had changed from sandals to boots, but the jeans were worn year-round,

and they fit him so well that Nikki had actually witnessed women turning around on the street to get a look at his butt. He favored simple, short-sleeved tee shirts, that weren't simple at all when stretched over the muscles of his upper body. Nikki did enjoy looking at him, but the thing she found most endearing about Jeff was that he honestly had no idea how hot he was. According to Lisa, he had been a late bloomer and still felt like the duckling.

Nikki, closing off the appreciative part of her brain, turned and walked back into the apartment. "How was San Fran?"

"Great. No complaints."

"And you left many broken hearts behind?"

"You know...the usual."

"Are you blushing, Jeff?"

"Oh, stop," he said, as he followed along behind her.

Stepping into the bathroom, she turned to face him, "You want to sit on my lap?"

"Sorry. I didn't realize."

She closed the bathroom door in his face, smiling. She had gotten him twice, and he was definitely blushing.

As he walked back into the apartment, Jeff picked up a photograph that was lying on Nikki's worktable.

"How goes the crusade?" he asked.

"It goes." The toilet flushed.

Jeff was looking at a photograph of a love affair gone wrong. The fight between two women over the same man had drawn a crowd on the street. A nice-looking Latino man, with his shirttail flying, had a fiery Latina woman in pink stretch pants slung over his shoulder. With high heels falling off her feet and a fuzzy purple sweater riding up over her bare midriff, she was caught in frantic motion, attempting to launch herself onto the home-wrecker standing in front of them. The man, who had been the subject of the fight to begin with, was now the unintended victim – being clobbered by both women. Jeff smiled as he read the inscription written by hand: LIVID VIOLET.

When Nikki walked out of the bathroom, she saw the photograph in Jeff's hand.

"What do you think?" she asked.

“Are they all this good?”

“I’ve got some new ones that are better,” she said. “But maybe you’re asking the wrong person. I don’t know if anybody even notices them. This whole endeavor may be the ultimate joke on me.”

“It’s not a joke at all,” he said.

“I’m standing on the street in the middle of the night, pretty sure I’m going to get arrested, or murdered. And I’m barely hanging on, Jeff. Half of the time I’m just scared.”

“I’ve seen your work around,” he told her, quietly.

She looked up, interested. “Yeah...?”

“I really liked the ‘FLESH RED’. That was the purse snatching, right?”

“What did you think?”

“Best I’ve seen in a while.”

“Really,” she asked, very surprised. “That gives me hope.”

“It should.”

“Coming from you, it’s a nice compliment,” she said, watching him.

“Well, I’ve got confidence in you. It’ll happen, it just takes time.”

“But I’d like to bring attention to my work now. Preferably in a place where I can have my name attached to it.” Nikki laughed. “Not that I haven’t enjoyed these urban guerrilla days...”

“Do you have a book?”

“You want a book?”

“Do you have a *portfolio* of your photographs?” he clarified, with a smile.

“Oh,” she mumbled, feeling a little foolish. “I’ve probably got enough work for a small portfolio. Why are you asking?”

“I thought of something when I was in San Francisco,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for the right time to bring it up.”

“Okay.” She wasn’t sure where he was going with this.

“Can you put a book together? No filler, just your best work.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

He focused on his boots. “I’ve got a friend who manages a gallery. The gallery’s been getting some decent press lately, so it could be a good thing for you.”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious. And you need to take it seriously too, because this is a favor I can call in once.” He was on more confident ground now. “What do you think?”

“I think I’d like to do it,” Nikki said.

“Alright then, you’ve got a plan.” Jeff smiled. He watched her push the hair back from her face, losing his train of thought for a moment. “I’ll give my friend a call.”

“Okay.” She was still trying to adjust to the idea.

“Nervous?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah,” she confessed, “Extremely.”

“It’s going to be okay,” he said. “I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything.”

Nikki followed him to the door. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“I’m pretty sure I can get you in front of her. After that, it’s up to you.”

“I won’t let you down.” Nikki ran her hands through her hair, aware that Jeff was watching her.

“How tall are you?” he asked, standing in the doorway, “Five-six, five-seven...?”

“I wish,” she said, eyeing him suspiciously. “I’m closer to five-four – in shoes.”

“I always thought you were taller.” His gaze dropped back to his boots. “You look kind of delicate. But you’ve got a big personality, I guess.”

“You think?” Nikki wondered where this conversation was going. *If he zinged her now, she was going to hit him!*

He took a breath and looked her straight in the eyes. “Yeah, your presence sure dominates a room, but you’re really a slim little package.”

Laughter erupted from her. “A slim little package?” she asked, feeling a pleasant flutter in her stomach.

Jeff laughed with her. “Go ahead and laugh. But it’s true.” He touched the top of her head with his lips. “I’ve got to go. I’ll let you know what happens.”

Smiling, he walked out of the apartment, pulling the door closed behind him.

Nikki felt unbelievably lighthearted, listening to him bounding down the stairs. Her life was changing in every possible way. The world had suddenly opened up for her.

Walking into the kitchen, Nikki lit a burner under the kettle. She was searching through her cabinets for tea when she heard the voice.

“Hey, Texas, can you hear me?”

Nikki ran over to open the window, looking down at Jeff who was sitting on the hood of a two-year-old black Beemer.

“Hey,” she said. “You have to watch who’s around when you say that.”

“Why? You’re fourth generation. It’s in your blood.” He was comfortable with the teasing. “Believe me, I remind myself everyday – *don’t mess with Texas.*”

“But Derek’s calling me ‘Texas’ now.”

“I thought you liked it.”

“I kind of like it when you say it, but I don’t want to hear it coming out of everybody’s mouth.”

“I understand.” Jeff grinned at her. “We’ll keep it a private thing, just between you and me.”

“There is no private thing between you and me! You have too many women chasing your body as it is. Get over it.”

“Your words are telling me ‘no’ but when I look in your eyes, there is a whole other story going on.”

“Oh, my god, you are so conceited that I cannot believe it. Go home. I’m closing my window now.”

“Wait, Nikki. You called me last night, something about privacy laws.”

“Oh, that.”

“What did you want to know?”

“I was feeling momentarily neurotic,” she told him. “Now I think that it’s better if I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Jeff said, looking up at her uncertainly. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure.” She could hear the kettle whistling.

Hopping off the hood of his car, Jeff slid behind the wheel. He started the engine and opened the window, leaning out to talk to her.

“I’d better get going. You’ve got me doing jobs for you now.” He waved as he pulled out into the street.

Nikki ran back to the kitchen. The kettle was wailing for her.



## CHAPTER FIVE

There were lights on in the graphics house, but the door was locked. Nikki rang the bell and waited, standing in front of the glass panel so she could be seen in the dark.

Lisa waved to her, walking down the hall, her purse swinging at her side. She turned the lights off as she opened the door. “Your timing’s perfect, I’m starving. Where is this place?”

“A few blocks away. You’ll recognize it when you see it.”

“I’d almost given up on you,” Lisa said, locking the door behind her.

“Sorry. I got a late start on the day.”

“It doesn’t matter. This will be fun.” Lisa jangled her car keys. “I’m driving.”

They hopped into her Passat, and buckled up. With the moon-roof open and a Pretenders CD playing loud enough to attract the attention of people on the street, Lisa pulled away from the curb. “Where to?” she asked.

“Take a right at the corner. The restaurant is two blocks up on the left side.”

As Lisa pulled onto the boulevard, she looked at all the people who were out and about. “I love it when the seasons change and it starts getting dark earlier. Love the lights in the street, and seeing all the shops and restaurants lit up.”

“It’s coming up on the left,” Nikki said. “Ristorante Nuti. See the red awning with the valet parking in front? That’s it, but it’s going to be hard to get over there right now.”

Before the words were out of Nikki’s mouth, Lisa had already changed lanes. Flooring the gas pedal, she crossed through on-coming traffic, heading straight for an alley next to the restaurant. There was a scraping sound on the bottom of the car as Lisa hit a dip in the driveway.

Nikki braced herself, hands on the dashboard. “Ooh. That didn’t sound good.”

“It’s not good, but I’ve done it before. And we’re here. We made it.”

“Barely,” Nikki said, with her eyes wide. “You drive like a teenager.”

“Relax. Why do you think we have seatbelts and airbags?”

Two valets ran over to open the car doors for them, but Nikki was already out of the car, heading toward the entrance. Lisa grabbed the claim check, and rushed after her.

\* \* \*

The ladies followed the maitre d' as he led them through the elegant little restaurant. Dimly lit for evening, with fine linen tablecloths over dark polished wood, there was a hushed feel to the room. It was still early for the dinner crowd, so the place was not especially busy yet.

The clientele at this hour was older, upper middle class, and dressed-up for their night out. The men looked well groomed and successful in finely tailored suits, and the women shared that distinctly expensive Beverly Hills' look.

Nikki turned to glance at Lisa. They had both realized at the same time that they were noticeably under-dressed for this restaurant.

Nikki leaned in, whispering, "Sorry, I didn't know it was so fancy."

They looked down at their clothes, seeing rumpled sweaters over short skirts.

"Doesn't matter," Lisa said. "What's life without a few embarrassing moments?"

As the maitre d' stopped at a small window table, he turned to address Nikki. "Is this the table you wanted?"

"Yes it is," she said. "Thank you."

He seated them, and left menus with "Ristorante Nuti" printed on the cover.

"Your waiter will be with you in a moment. Enjoy the evening."

As they opened the menus, Nikki's eyes jumped to the prices. "Wow. I didn't realize this place would be so expensive," she said. "We don't have to stay."

"I'd like to stay," Lisa said, leaning closer to whisper. "I'd rather pay for our meals than walk back through those snooty people – who, by the way, are staring at us."

Nikki and Lisa were turning to stare back, as their waiter arrived.

The man was Italian, in his late twenties or early thirties, and very appealing. He wore a crisp white shirt with an elegant collar, and black trousers with a sharp crease down the front.

When he smiled, their eyebrows rose in unison.

"Would you ladies like to start with a drink tonight?"

"I think a drink would be lovely," Lisa said, smiling back at him. "Nikki...?"

"I'd like sake, if you have it."

“Sake?” he asked as he turned to her, wondering if that was a joke. “No. That would be the Japanese restaurant down the street.”

Nikki looked up, grinning. “I realize that, but you never know. One day it might catch on in a big way, so I always ask.”

He took another glance at her, surprised to be having an actual conversation with a customer. “We do have an excellent wine selection, just no rice wine. Sorry about that.”

She laughed. “It’s not a problem. At least you knew what it was. You’d be surprised how many people don’t.”

“Would you like to see our wine list?” he asked.

Nikki looked across the table. “Lisa...?”

“Do you have a house wine we might like?” Lisa asked, noticing that his eyelashes were exceptionally long.

“I think I can probably find something for you,” he offered, friendly and patient, as though he had all the time in the world.

“Okay then,” Lisa said, “You do that.”

Then he turned back to Nikki. “And for you...?”

“I’ll have the same.”

“Very good,” he said, glancing at each of them once again. A man doubly blessed. “I’ll be right back with your wine.”

They followed his progress as he walked away.

“Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve flirted with anyone?” Lisa asked.

“I’m glad you’re having a good time. I am, too.”

“Sometimes you just have to get out in the world to recognize the possibilities.”

“Yes, you do,” Nikki said, distracted by the busboy, arriving with a fresh basket of hot bread. “That looks so good, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He filled a small plate with olive oil, floated a drop of balsamic vinegar onto the oil, and left the table.

Both ladies were reaching for the bread when their waiter reappeared slightly out of breath, carrying a bottle of wine.

He poured them half a glass each. “Have a taste, and tell me what you think.”

“This is really good,” Lisa said, taking her second sip.

Nikki looked up, a little surprised. "What is it?"

"A very nice Pinot Grigio," he answered, "What do you think?"

"This can't be your house wine," Nikki said.

"Well, no," the waiter confided, filling their glasses. "But it's certainly my idea of a house wine, and I think we'll call it that tonight." By the amusement in his eyes, it was obvious that this was not a mistake. He had given them a gift.

"What's your name?" Lisa asked, giving him her complete attention.

"Richard," he said, encouraged that she had asked.

"I'm Lisa, and my friend is Nikki."

"It's very nice to meet you both."

"Well, Richard, the feeling is mutual," Lisa said, smiling just for him. "And thank you for the wine. It's certainly appreciated."

"My pleasure," he said. "Would you like a little time to look at the menus, or are you ready to order?"

"I know exactly what I want," Nikki said. "But it's not on the menu."

Richard looked at her, puzzled. "We seem to be batting zero for you tonight. You weren't looking for sushi, were you?"

"No. Thank you for asking," she said, rolling her eyes at him. "I know you have what I want because I've seen it served here, but I'm not finding it on this menu."

Richard was beginning to have fun. "Alright, hit me with it."

"Cioppino," Nikki said.

"You're right," he said with no hesitation. "It isn't on the menu."

"Well, I saw it served in this restaurant, at this very table, yesterday at lunch."

"Are you always this difficult?"

"Yes. She is," Lisa said, jumping into the conversation.

Richard shook his head, a big grin on his face. "We have a regular customer who comes in once or twice a week. Sometimes the chef makes it special for him."

"You think you could get him to make it special for me?"

"Me, too," Lisa said. "I want cioppino."

"Oh, now you're working as a team," he said. "Okay, I'll check with the chef, but don't hold your breath."

They watched him walk back into the kitchen.

“I like the way he walks,” Lisa said, her head tilting to the left, for a better view.

“He has a certain confidence, doesn’t he?” Nikki asked.

“Yes, he does.”

“Are you interested in him?”

Lisa pulled her attention back. “I’m interested.”

“I think he’s interested in you.”

“Really...?”

“Oh, yeah, I think he was snoozing before you showed up.”

Lisa leaned forward with her elbows on the table. “Would it embarrass you if I slipped him my phone number?”

“I think you should do it,” Nikki told her, taking a sip of wine. “Here’s my question for you – on a totally different subject. Jeff said he’s got a friend at an art gallery. Have any idea who it is?”

“Sarah?”

“I don’t know. He just said he had a friend who manages a gallery.”

“That would be Sarah.”

“What do you know about her?”

“Her name is Sarah Thompson, and she’s an attractive woman slightly older than my brother, who would like to gobble him up for breakfast.” She smiled at her own joke.

“How did this conversation come up?”

“Jeff wants me to meet her. He thinks she might be interested in my work.”

Lisa sat back in her chair, looking at Nikki more carefully. “He must have a lot of confidence in you. It’s extremely difficult to get an introduction to that woman.”

“So it’s a good thing?”

“Are you kidding? Sarah knows everybody you need to know. She’s smart, with great instincts – and Jeff’s never sent anyone to her before. She’ll want to meet you.”

Taking a sip of wine, Lisa glanced around the room.

“But there’s more to this conversation. And we should find a quieter spot.”

“Let’s go to my place,” Nikki said.

## CHAPTER SIX

The man waited in the dark, restless with impatience. He had to get off the street soon. It was too quiet. Somebody was sure to notice him.

He pulled a fresh smoke from his pack, and used the butt of the old cigarette to light it. The man didn't want to draw attention by lighting a match.

He had seen the women walk into the apartment building together. A few minutes later, lights flashed on in the window he was watching. It had to be one of the women, but which one?

The only thing to do now was watch and wait. See who came out, and who stayed behind. Then he would know.

\* \* \*

“Sarah's first success story was her second husband – a photographer, as a matter of fact. He had talent, but couldn't seem to turn photography into a career. And that failure was making him a petty, self-destructive guy.”

Lisa was finishing her story about Sarah Thompson.

“So in an effort to save the marriage, she staged her first major ‘event’, and it was a huge success.”

The two friends were comfortably slouched back into the cushions of Nikki's big armchairs, their bare legs and feet stretched out on the bed in front of them.

“Suddenly the husband didn't need her anymore. She had made the man a star, and everybody wanted him.” Lisa took a breath, and blew it out. “Can you imagine? She'd opened up the world for him – and he moved on, without her.”

“Nice fellow,” Nikki mumbled, with her chin resting in the palm of her hand.

“There were a few difficult years. It's hard to recover from betrayal. But eventually the sadness was replaced by anger. And anger was a healthier state, because it gave her purpose. Apparently, revenge can be very satisfying. In the end, it changed the course of her life.”

Lisa pulled her legs up under her, leaning forward.

“She decided that the best way to even the playing field was to find a few more photographers – people with more talent, better looks, and edgier work. Hell hath no fury...” Lisa sank back, a smile on her face. “Ever heard of David Cruz?”

“It sounds vaguely familiar.”

“There you go. She won. He had his fifteen minutes of fame, but no more. In the first year, Sarah had found three other photographers worthy of attention. Each of their careers took off with her help. It became obvious that her success with David was no fluke. Sarah had the gift. She was the shining light. When you have the touch, everyone wants to be close to you.”

“She obviously got her revenge,” Nikki said, “Why is she still doing this?”

“She’s a very interesting woman who thinks of herself as a patron of the arts. She finds new talent, sets the stage for them – then invites the right people and brings them out. I’d really love to make fun of her, but she has an uncanny knack. Sarah has launched a lot of careers.”

“She can’t be making that much money, can she?”

“The woman doesn’t need money, but she does enjoy the attention. She is becoming very influential,” Lisa said. “It’s a heady kind of power.”

“And this is the woman I’m going to meet?” Nikki asked.

“Are you worried?”

“I’m not sure it’s such a good idea. She’s going to intimidate the hell out of me.”

“Why? You’re smart, and socially well-behaved. You’ve got the talent. Show her something that she likes, and let her open up the world for *you*.”

“I don’t necessarily need a whole world.”

“You don’t know that yet, just stay with me. Sarah’s last show was a rather shocking group of nudes – beautiful young women doing very provocative, scandalous things. The showing was by invitation only, and people were dying to get on that list. Apparently, everyone who had seen the photographs was talking about them. Anyone who had not been invited was desperate to be included in the group, and that’s power, honey.”

“It’s a lot of pressure.”

“Sarah thrives on pressure,” Lisa said. “She’s a smart woman. And while there’s always a chance that she could fall on her face, so far her taste is holding strong. And it isn’t just photographers. It’s fashion designers, painters, musicians, and I don’t know what else. She has the studio space in town, and there’s a huge house in Pasadena.”

“I’ve never been to Pasadena.”

“This could be your chance. Sarah hosts dinners that last long into the night, with some of the brightest people around. You never know who you’ll meet,” Lisa said, as she shook her head in wonder. “Jeff has been there a few times and says the house is huge. It’s easy to lose your way.”

“Maybe that’s why she likes to have people around.”

\* \* \*

Lisa had left an hour ago, leaving Nikki with a lot to think about. It was after eleven now, and she was a long way from sleep. She stood at the window watching the street, waiting for the red Jag to bring her man back.

The plan had been to post the LIVID VIOLET shots tonight, but Nikki was afraid she’d miss him if she left. What if she was missing him by staying? Maybe she just needed to get out and do something, even if it was the wrong something.

Slipping into a jacket, she grabbed her camera and flew out the door, taking the steps two at a time. She felt more awake now as she got behind the wheel of her car. Pulling away from the curb, Nikki headed out to see how good her instincts were.

\* \* \*

She cruised down Melrose, from the Hollywood Freeway to Doheny. A drive she enjoyed, seeing the social layers of the city unfold before her in one stretch of roadway.

In the first blocks, the signs were in Spanish, with older, very worn-down apartments and hotels housing families that were mainly Latino. There were no yards here for the children, only a sidewalk separating the buildings from the street.

A few blocks down, the signs changed to Thai. And neighborhood restaurants joined the markets and small businesses in another family pocket they called Thai Town.



Nikki never minded the traffic once she passed La Brea. Because it was the part of Melrose that attracted the tourists and locals, especially groups of teenagers on the weekends. This was the place to find tattoo and piercing parlors alongside hip young clothing boutiques. You could buy a hookah at the smoke shop and then drop in next door for an espresso. There were Goth shops next to Vintage stores, interspersed with restaurants and sidewalk cafes.

While parking was extremely difficult, there always seemed to be a row of Harleys parked outside Johnny Rockets. And tonight, further down the street, there had been a striking line of brightly colored Kawasaki racing bikes.

But Nikki had not seen the red Jaguar.

Further west, Melrose changed again, each new block becoming more expensive than the one before it. Her favorite places were the antique shops and designer boutiques, which were all too pricey for her budget, but lovely to browse through. Those shops were closed now and their streets quiet.

It was after midnight, and she had driven Melrose to its end at Doheny. This was the high end of the social strata. It was Beverly Hills. The place where the haves had. Nikki had followed her instincts, and come up with nothing.

She turned around and started back home, dead tired, and strangely distressed. It had all been wasted time. In a moment of panic, she wondered if he was gone – out of her life before he was even in it. *How would she ever find him again?* She didn't know his name or anything about him. She had been watching for the Jag, assuming it was his. But it could have belonged to the other man.

There were times when you just couldn't win for losing. Switching on the radio, she moved through three stations before finding the song that she wanted. It was Don Henley's *Boy's of Summer*. She turned it up loud, hearing a plaintiveness that touched her heart tonight. That song got her home.

Maybe luck hadn't deserted her altogether. The parking place she had left in front of her building was still there, waiting for her.

\* \* \*

The next morning was disorienting. Nikki woke up at 7:45. She'd left her window shade open during the night and the morning light had roused her. The sky was grey, but the clouds were tinted pink from the rising sun. It looked like a Los Angeles sunset on the wrong side of the earth. An amber sun was rising in a bank of rose-colored clouds, and the apartment was filled with dusk colorings.

Nikki felt tired and ready to end the day – couldn't imagine starting it. Not now. She reached out for the phone, pulling it into bed with her. Touching the second button on speed dial, she waited.

Lisa picked up on the fifth ring. "Hello."

"Did I wake you?"

"It's okay."

Nikki heard a yawn. "I'm sorry, Lisa. I called too early."

"I needed to get up anyway," she said. "What's up?"

"Did you hear from Richard last night by any chance?"

"Uh huh," Lisa said. "Guess what? He's cooking dinner for me at his place Friday. Then we're going salsa dancing."

"You're a very lucky girl."

"I know. I even told him I couldn't dance, and Richard said he'd teach me."

"At least one of us is learning." Nikki pulled a pair of sweatpants on over her pajama bottoms, and stood up, taking the phone with her.

At the window, she looked down on the street.

"Will you do me a favor?"

"I will."

"Ask Richard about his regular customer that comes in a couple of times a week."

"Sure. It gives me an excuse to call him. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know everything, to be honest. But I'll settle for his name."

"Okay. Let's see what I can do."

"And, Lisa," she said, slipping into a jacket. "Will you ask Richard to let us know the next time the man's at the restaurant?"

"No problem, sweetheart."

\* \* \*

As the door closed behind her, Nikki paused on the stoop and tried to remember why she was out at this hour. Walking down the front steps, she automatically turned to the right.

*Ah, now she remembered!* A white chocolate mocha had been the incentive to get her on the street. It had worked to get her out the front door, and would work to get her the rest of the way.

The night had been strange. She hadn't slept well. She remembered dreaming but couldn't remember the dreams. It was hard to put one foot in front of the other, and the bag hanging on her shoulder weighed a ton this morning. She just needed to put it down somewhere for a minute.

Stepping into a walkway between buildings, Nikki let the bag drop to the grass at her feet.

"Nice to see you again..."

She heard the voice first; then felt a warm hand brush against her wrist. When Nikki looked up, she was staring into the deep brown eyes of the man she had been searching for all night. And here he was – standing with her in a bower of fuchsia bougainvillea blossoms.

"Remember me?" he asked, with his dark eyes resting on her.

Nikki couldn't catch her breath with him so close. "I...don't think so. No."

"I'm sure you remember the restaurant though. You were taking pictures."

"You have me confused with someone else," she said, trying to avoid those eyes.

"No," the man insisted. "I remember your face very well."

He was so intently focused on Nikki, that it disturbed her confidence.

"I have one of those faces, I guess." She turned to walk away. "It happens all the time."

"Who hired you?"

"What?" The question caught her off-guard.

"I think someone hired you to take pictures of me."

"Hired me?" Nikki had spun around so fast that she tripped over her own bag.

"Nobody hired me. Where did you get that idea?"

But his focus had moved to the large bag on the ground at Nikki's feet. Picking it up by the straps, he glanced inside seeing a very professional-looking camera, with a telephoto lens, and too many rolls of film.

Nikki's face was hot with embarrassment.

"If you weren't hired, why were you doing it?" he asked.

"I never said I took them. I said I wasn't hired to take them."

The man gave her a long look. "My mistake," he said, handing the bag back. "If you didn't take them..." Then he started to walk away. "Sorry I bothered you."

She was losing him.

"I never said I *didn't* take them," Nikki announced loudly.

He turned around, and strolled back to her. "Okay," he said, putting his hands in his trouser pockets. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Nothing incriminating," she said, looking into those dark eyes.

Then she smiled.

He was not entirely immune.

"You know," he said. "It's difficult to begin a friendship with someone when they aren't being honest with you."

"Is that what we're doing?" she asked. "Beginning a friendship?"

"I think that remains to be seen."

Neither moved, but each was very aware of the other.

"What's your name?" he asked finally, in a different tone entirely.

She had a moment of panic, which he read immediately.

"I think it would be okay," he said, "If you give me your first name."

He was standing perfectly still, waiting.

"Nikki," she said, lifting the bag back to the safety of her own shoulder.

"That's your real name?"

"Uh huh," she answered. Thinking she might be in over her head here.

"Well, Nikki..."

The man took a breath. There was a conversation to finish.

“In the future, it would probably be best to ask someone before you take their picture.” He looked away. “I’m sure you didn’t mean any harm.” And then his eyes came back to her. “But I’m going to need those photographs.”

*HER photographs? Yeah, that was going to happen.*

“Okay. Give me your address,” she said, “and I’ll send them to you.”

“Give me your address, and I’ll stop by and pick them up.”

She laughed, delighted. “Give me your phone number. I’ll *call* with my address.”

He smiled, watching her face as she laughed. “Maybe I’ll see you around.”

Then he started walking away, as though it wasn’t important to him anymore.

“Wait!” she said. “I don’t know your name.”

When he turned to look at her, they suddenly made intense eye contact. It was so surprising that they each took a step back.

“No more pictures,” the man told her. And he was gone before she could speak.

Nikki stood there, too amazed to move. She felt a fire spark in the center of her chest. She’d spent all of last night looking for him, and he had found her this morning! How could he have found her? How would he have known where to look for her?

She picked up a handful of fuchsia bougainvillea blossoms, and dropped them into her bag – something tangible to hold onto. Nikki could feel the glow spreading through her entire being.

It was still cold on the street, but warmth flowed through her.

The coffee shop was twenty feet away, but she wasn’t moving. The truth was that Nikki had lost interest in the white chocolate mocha. There were butterflies playing ping-pong inside her stomach. She loved the world right now, and would probably hug everybody. Maybe she’d just go home.

\* \* \*

The phone was ringing as Nikki opened the door. She almost flattened Sammy running to answer it. He cursed at her in cat-speak, and scooted out of the way.

“Hello?”

“I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“Hi, Jeff, I just walked in the door.”

“Out all night were we?”

“No,” she said, still catching her breath. “Out late and up early.”

“Do those words actually go together?”

Nikki laughed. “Remind me to explain the concept to you someday,” she said, slipping her jacket off. “Had a long conversation with Lisa last night, concerning your dear friend, Sarah Thompson.”

“My dear friend?” he asked. “Is that sarcasm I’m detecting in your voice? And it’s so early in the morning.”

“It’s like good room service, Jeff. Available twenty-four hours a day.”

“Alright, I’ll bite. Just how long was this conversation? I didn’t realize that Lisa knew Sarah that well.”

“It was pretty much second-hand information, but it sure raised my anxiety level about meeting her.”

“That’s why I’m calling, Nikki. She’s going out of town tomorrow.”

“Oh. Well...that’s okay. It was a nice thought.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” he said. “You don’t get off that easily, but good try. Sarah will be back in a couple of days and she wants to see you. Talk about timing! She’s looking for someone now.”

“You’re kidding, right? I’m not going to be ready in a couple of days.”

“Why? You’ve got good work, just put it together.”

“I’m serious, Jeff. It isn’t enough time.”

“Hey, the offer was extended, and I had to take it. This is your shot with her, Nikki. If you don’t want it...”

“I want it!”

“Alright, then,” he said.

Nikki paced, feeling a nervous excitement that was close to panic. “Lisa told me that Sarah is a career-maker,” she said finally. “Is that true?”

“There aren’t any guarantees,” he told her. “But if she took an interest in you, I think you’d be in excellent hands.”

Nikki closed her eyes. "Okay." She composed herself. "Sorry I was cranky. You're right. I've got good work to show her. She'll like it, or she won't."

"I think she's going to like everything about you."

"I'm not getting my hopes up," she said. "This isn't something I can control."

"Nikki," he said calmly, "It's normal to be nervous. But you don't go into an opportunity like this with a negative attitude."

"What did you tell her?"

"What do you mean?"

"About me, Jeff. What did you tell Sarah about me?"

"The usual stuff, you know," he said, caught off-guard.

"No, I don't know. Maybe you're going to have to be a little more specific."

There was an awkward pause, and then the sound of his breathing.

Couldn't be good if he's stalling, she thought.

"I told her you're a talented photographer," Jeff said quietly, clearing his throat. "Best there is – other than me, of course." There was a nervous laugh. "It's true, by the way."

She couldn't speak, thinking he might be teasing her.

"I believe the work you're doing now is remarkable, and Sarah needs to see it. I told her she owed it to herself to meet you, Nikki."

"You didn't...really tell her that."

"I did," he said, "Every word."

She was afraid she'd cry if she said anything. "Thank you."

The words were whispered, but he'd heard them.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

In the six hours since the phone call with Jeff, Nikki had gone through several stages – the first one coming as close to a religious experience as she could imagine. Everything she wanted from the world was on her own lap. Who would have thought that total satisfaction would be so small?

Then she imagined all the things she would accomplish in the next few days. The mountains she would move to prepare for her meeting with Sarah. She even started a list to help organize her thoughts. There were boxes of slides she'd saved over the last few years. So many images she loved, all treasures, right at her fingertips. But as Nikki sorted through everything, she began to have the usual problems she had with her older work. It seemed dated now, and would have been embarrassing to show. Nothing to worry about though, right? Quality was what mattered at this point, not quantity. Even Jeff had said that her recent work was impressive. Nikki told herself that all she had to do today was start. It didn't matter what she did, the idea was simply to begin.

And that's when the panic attack hit.

*Who was she kidding? The first day was almost over. She'd never make it!*

There was no air in the room, she could barely breathe...

*Where was the air?*

Remembering her mother's words, she grabbed a small paper bag and stretched out on the hardwood floor, propping her feet up on the bed. Cupping the opening of the bag over her mouth and nose, Nikki forced her breathing to slow down, in an attempt to increase the carbon dioxide going into her blood.

She imagined her mother's cool hands on her forehead, her voice soft, reminding her to breathe slow and steady. Slow and steady. Slow...and steady.

The telephone rang. Nikki rolled over on the floor and reached out for the receiver. "Hello?"

"His name's Tony D'Angelo. Richard said his table is reserved for 9:00 tonight."

Nikki lay back on the floor. Suddenly, she had all the air in the world.



“Nikki, are you there?”

“I’m here, Lisa. Have I told you lately how wonderful you are?”

“Probably, but it’s always nice to remind me. Can we talk later? I let Derek leave for the day, and I’ve got another line ringing.”

“Sure. We’ll talk later. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie pie. Have fun.”

Nikki replaced the receiver and stared at the ceiling. “Tony D’Angelo.” Her eyes closed. “Tony…”

The paper bag fell from her hand.

\* \* \*

Tony was sitting at his usual window table drinking red wine, waiting for his meal. She watched him from the darkness of the sidewalk, letting people pass between them as they moved along the avenue.

She had seen Richard stop at the table a couple of times to refill Tony’s wine glass, always hanging around to chat. It was obvious the two got along well.

Nikki found herself enjoying the time, and wondering if her interest in the man was purely professional. There was just something about him.

Deciding to make her move, she stepped up to the window and turned slightly, leaning against the wall with her profile to him. It was hard to look casual propped against a wall. She hoped this was going to work.

Finally, she heard a tapping on the glass.

Nikki turned to the window, pretending surprise. She was pretty sure he wasn’t buying it, but he was smiling. He was also looking her over. There was no camera hanging around her neck, and none in her hands that he could see. But the face beckoned.

Tony turned around to talk to someone in the restaurant.

Nikki’s gaze was on him, as he put his hand up, signaling her to wait.

“Nikki!” Richard was loping down the sidewalk toward her, looking pleased.

“He’s the one, right?”

“He’s the one,” she said, trying to keep the recognition off her face, when Richard joined her outside the window.

“You’ve been invited inside,” he announced with a smile. “In fact, I’m not sure I can go back without you. Apparently, you’ve made an impression.”

When she turned back to Tony, their eyes met. She’d always liked blue eyes, but his were very dark. They were the most beautiful eyes she’d ever seen.

Richard had started back before he realized that she wasn’t with him. “Nikki?” He turned around to get her. “Why don’t you come in with me? You can talk to each other inside the restaurant.”

\* \* \*

Passing between the tables, Nikki was reminded of her first trip down that path with Lisa. Their walk of shame, she thought, smiling at the memory – rumpled sweaters, short skirts, and desert boots.

Tonight she’d worn tailored trousers, with a pin-stripe so subtle it was barely noticeable. Her sweater was thin and sleek, in peony-pink, with a tiny cap of a sleeve that left her arms bare. She’d decorated herself with every piece of sterling silver jewelry she owned, stepped into her best suede pumps, and decided she was ready for him.

And now, with Richard leading the way, she turned the corner heading down the final stretch to the window table. Tony was standing there waiting for her, dressed with exceptional taste as always.

He watched her arrive, and then glanced at the large purse she carried with her. It was soft, brown leather and obviously too flat to hide a camera. Satisfied, he offered a smile.

“Hello, again,” he said.

“Hello.” Nikki offered her hand, which he took and held onto for a moment.

“Just happened to be in the neighborhood?” he asked.

“Something like that,” she replied, slightly unnerved.

“Unless you were waiting for someone...”

“I’m here on my own,” she told him.

“Really?” he asked, surprised. “I find that hard to believe.”

Then he looked her over again, with more subtlety this time.

“Would you like to join me for dinner?”

Nikki seemed to hesitate.

“At least have a glass of wine. I won’t bite,” he promised.

Richard pulled the chair out for her. Then he retrieved a second wine glass from an empty table and handed it to Tony, knowing he preferred to pour.

“A Chianti,” Tony said, holding a glass of wine out to her. “It’s somewhat modest, but I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“Thank you.”

He took his seat across the table from her. “Hungry?” he asked.

“Almost always,” she answered.

He seemed to study her, with that remarkably direct gaze.

“The lady is joining me for dinner, Richard, anything you’d recommend?”

“The chef’s making one of your favorites.”

“If it’s the eggplant lasagna, we’ll have it,” Tony said. “And bring us a Caesar salad to start.”

He looked at Nikki.

“You like Caesar salad, don’t you?”

“I do, actually, very much.”

“I guess I should have asked if you like lasagna before I ordered it for you.”

He offered an apologetic shake of his head.

“I know the food here so well that I order for people automatically. Sorry.”

“That’s alright. You were generous to include me.”

“We’ll see,” Tony said, as he refilled their wine glasses.

“I like the wine a lot,” she told him.

“That’s a good start.” He raised his glass. “What shall we drink to?”

“It’s your party,” she reminded him. “It should be your toast.”

“Alright, then...” He waited, while she raised her glass alongside his. “Let’s drink to privacy.”

“And every person’s right to it,” she added, feeling especially generous when they’d touched glasses.

\* \* \*

“Mm,” Nikki said quietly, dabbing the corners of her mouth with the napkin.

She had finished every bite of her Caesar salad and was watching Tony eat, her mind racing along on a course of its own.

“Are you married?”

He looked up so suddenly that his fork hit the edge of the table. “Where did that come from?”

Nikki was floating pleasantly as she leaned closer. “I just wondered.”

“Do I look married?” Tony asked, somewhat confused.

“No. But you look like you must have some sort of attachment.”

“Why?”

Their gazes were locked across the table.

“Who picks your clothes?” she asked.

“I do. What does that have to do with anything?”

The conversation stopped momentarily as Richard arrived with two plates of lasagna and a busboy swooped in to clear the salad plates away. After putting their dinner plates in front of them, Richard offered freshly grated parmesan cheese, which they both accepted. Noticing that the conversation had stopped with him at the table, he prepared to leave. “Enjoy your dinner.”

Tony waited until they were alone. “Are *you* married?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I was married,” she answered.

“Good. Then it’s perfectly alright for us to have dinner together,” he said, settling back in his chair again. “Anything else you were wondering about?”

“No,” she said. “I guess I’m a naturally curious person.” Then Nikki shrugged, adding, “Some people find it charming.”

“Oh, I’m quite sure they do.” He was watching her now. “Is it my turn to ask a question?”

“Depends on the question,” she said.

“What is it you do? For a living, I mean.”

She had no intention of answering his question, but didn’t want to be rude either.

“Still in the process of establishing my career,” she told him, finally. “I’m a work in progress.”

He mulled that over – then pressed. “And what would that work be?”

“Oh... a little of this, a little of that,” she said, smiling as she turned the question around on him, “What is it *you* do?”

Tony took a second to consider her. “I like to think of myself as an entrepreneur.”

Nikki’s eyes narrowed. Keeping her smile in place, she sought to pin him down. “What is that exactly?”

“It’s...” he began, smiling right back at her, “A little of this...and that.”

Nikki laughed loudly. “We seem to be in the same line of work.”

People turned to look at them, but they didn’t care.

“Small world,” he said.

“Isn’t it,” she said. “Judging by your wardrobe, I’d have to say you’re doing it much better than I am.”

Neither of them knew where this was going, but each recognized that someone uncommon had entered their life.

\* \* \*

It was a perfectly clear night, and the street was filtered with silver from the moon. Tony stood with Nikki just outside the restaurant.

“Are you parked with the valet?” he asked.

“No. Actually, I’m on the street.”

“It’s a nice night. I’ll walk with you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’d like to walk with you, if you don’t mind.”

The valet recognized Tony, and grabbed his keys. “I’ve got it, sir.”

“I’m going to walk a bit, Mario. Where’s the car parked?”

“Two blocks up on the left, Mr. D’Angelo. I can be back with it in less than a minute.”

Tony smiled, palming Mario a tip in exchange for the keys.

“Thanks a lot, sir. Have a good evening.”

Tony turned back to Nikki. “So, which way are we headed?”

She pointed up the block to the left. “Heading your way, I believe.”

They walked quietly to the end of the block.

As they crossed the street, Nikki reached into her purse and removed a large manila envelope. She stopped under a streetlight.

“I have something for you,” she said, holding the envelope out to him.

“This is for me?” Tony asked, his defenses going up immediately. He wasn’t sure what she was doing.

“I’d really like you to open it now, while I’m here.”

She watched the dark hair falling into his face, as Tony bent his head and concentrated on the clasp of the envelope.

His eyes lifted in surprise when he pulled the photographs out into the light. “These are the pictures you took.”

There were five 8x10 prints on thick, high-quality paper stock. Borderless with an elegant matte finish, each shot was perfect in its own way.

Taken at the window of the Ristorante Nuti, and printed in black and white, they were reminiscent of another era. Evoking the glamour of Hollywood from the late twenties through the forties, each photograph had been labored over and exhaustively retouched until Nikki felt it was perfect. The result made all the work worthwhile. The prints were dark and stirring. His bold confidence was there, the heat in his eyes, even the strength and elegance of his bones – it was all there. Nikki was intensely proud of each shot. But more than anything, she wanted Tony to like them.

The photographs were a singular tribute to him, and the gesture so overwhelming that he was speechless. He studied each print; then went through the stack a second time.

Buying himself time to think, Tony carefully returned the prints to the envelope. “You’re very good, Nikki.”

“Thank you.”

“You’ve got some serious talent,” he said, looking at her in a totally different way. “I had no idea you did this kind of work.”

“Sometimes I surprise myself.”

They had entered a residential area. It was darker here, and secluded.

“You’re doing pretty well in the business?” he asked, clearly distracted now.

“I’m doing better lately,” she answered, seeing the familiar frown settling between his brows.

Tony stopped. His car was parked at the curb. “Are any of these in circulation?”

“No,” she answered.

“What about the negatives?”

“Not going anywhere,” she told him firmly. “They stay with me.”

“Got many photographs lying around the house?” he asked, trying for a smile.

It seemed to be a question of trust, so Nikki told him what he needed to hear.

“You’re holding all of the prints in your hand, right now.”

He was watching her carefully. “Okay, Nikki. I’m going to take your word.”

Tony took a breath, eyes checking his surroundings.

“I don’t like having my picture taken. It’s odd. A phobia, I guess. But I’ve learned to live with it.” He looked away. “Hard to understand, I know.”

“Actually, I do understand,” she said.

“You have a phobia?” he asked, with interest.

“In my family, we call it an *eccentricity*. And it’s used as a compliment.” Then she smiled, saying, “Mine are too numerous to name.”

There was a garden nearby, and roses perfumed the air.

“Could I buy these from you?” he asked.

Caught off-guard, Nikki was very still, considering the offer.

“Take them,” she told him, quietly. “They’re my gift. You don’t pay for a gift.”

Her sincerity threw him. “You’ve humbled me,” he said. “I don’t let people photograph me. I’m rude to you because you do, and then you give me these.” He shook his head. “Believe me, I’ve never looked so good.”

“Have you looked at yourself lately?” she asked.

Tony laughed. “Not if I can help it.”

There was a wave of emotion running between them. Not an unpleasant experience at all.

“My car is here,” he said. “Where are you parked? Should we drive?”

She glanced up the street. “I’m not that far away. I can walk it.”

“I’ll go with you,” he said.

“I’m really okay.”

They stood together, neither ready for the night to end yet.

“I don’t want you to go,” he said.

“It’s late…” But she found herself moving closer.

“Then let me take you home.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Nikki said, shivering.

“You’re cold. Here…” He was taking his jacket off for her.

“I’m not cold. Really, I’m fine.” She smiled, looking into his eyes.

“So,” he began. “You’re not going to let me take you home?”

Nikki shook her head.

“Why is that?” he asked. “You don’t trust me?”

Nikki laughed, and he drank it in.

“Then why?”

“I don’t trust *me*,” she said.

“I like that,” he said, touching her arm. “I need a way to reach you – do you have a phone?”

“Yes.”

“Could you write the number down for me?” He watched as she opened her purse, searching for paper and a pen.

“I don’t have anything to…”

Tony handed her a Mont Blanc pen, along with the manila envelope he was holding, and watched as she wrote her number down.

When she handed them back to him, Nikki said, “Do I get your number?”

He smiled. “I’ll call you.”

There was a cool heat to the man.

“Good luck,” she said. “I don’t have a cell phone. That’s why I asked for your number. I thought it might be easier.” She smiled back at him, a gleam in her eyes. “I’ve heard it can be frustrating trying to reach me.”

“I promise to call.”

He leaned closer, aware that people were sleeping in the homes around them.



“I don’t want you to go, Nikki. Stay out with me for a while.”

She hesitated. “It really is late.”

“We can go back to the restaurant.”

“They were closing when we left.”

“They’ll let us in for a coffee.”

She felt his warm breath on her neck as he leaned down. His lips tickled her ear when he whispered, “Just a coffee...”

\* \* \*

When Lisa walked back into the office, carrying dinner in a box, she was surprised to find her brother lying on the sofa, reading one of her magazines.

“Good evening,” Lisa said. “I’m glad to see you making yourself at home. A little late for a visit though, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is late,” he agreed. “Why are you here?”

“Billing,” she said, frowning. “Want to help me?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” he said. “Do it tomorrow.”

“Not a chance,” she said. “I’ve got a date.”

Jeff looked up, his focus moving past her. “Where is she?”

“Where’s who?”

“Nikki.”

“I don’t know. I talked to her earlier. What made you think she was here?”

“I can smell her perfume on the cushions.”

Lisa bent over, pulling the cushion out from under his head. She buried her nose in the fabric. “It’s there,” she said. “But it’s extremely subtle.” She tossed the pillow back to him. “And they say men can’t smell.”

That got Jeff’s attention. “Where in the world did you hear that?”

“I think it must have been in response to a comment I made about men dousing themselves in cologne.”

He gave her a look. “I’m remembering now why we don’t share office space.”

“Such a witty guy,” she remarked. “Stopping by to catch up on your reading, or did you want to talk to me about something?”

He put the magazine down, and sat up. "I'm here to talk."

"Okay." Lisa parked herself next to him. "What's up?"

"I feel badly that I haven't been around lately," he said. "I set this meeting up with Sarah, thinking I'd be here if Nikki needed help. But it's been wild. This is the first day I've had time to breathe in the past week, and the offers keep coming. I can't afford to turn anything down, because you never know when it's all going to go away."

"It's alright, I understand."

"But I was looking forward to it," he said. "I set this thing up, and I feel responsible."

"Nikki's in good shape."

"Is she making any headway at all?"

"Yes, she is."

"She's got to have something to show Sarah."

"I know that, Jeff." Lisa picked up the manila envelope from the coffee table. "Take a look at these. Nikki dropped them off earlier. "

Jeff took the envelope from her, sliding the prints out on the coffee table. He flipped through the stack, and then moved the photographs to his lap.

They were close-ups of Tony's face.

"Who is this guy?" he asked.

"Never mind that right now. Talk to me about the photographs."

"I didn't really see them that well." He slumped back on the sofa, the photographs in his hands. "Should I know him? Is he an actor?"

"No." She watched as Jeff went through them again.

"She's getting better." He was chewing on the inside of his lip. "This is authentic glamour. It's hard to get that look now. Almost retro..." He looked up. "Where did she meet him?"

"I'm not sure. I think it was just chance."

"Huh. What's the story?" he asked. "Who is he?"

"Could we talk about the work for a minute?"

"Okay." Jeff put the photographs on the table. "What do you want to know?"

"What you think."

“I think that she’s hitting her stride.” Sitting up straight, he rubbed his eyes with the backs of his fingers. “Beautiful work,” he said, honestly. “It really is.”

“Should it be in the book?” Lisa asked him.

“Has to be in the book,” he said. “Sarah needs to see them.” Jeff’s head dropped into his hands.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m tired,” he said. “I wanted to be here for her.”

“What’s going on with you?” Lisa asked.

He turned to look at her. “Is she seeing this man?”

Then it dawned on her.

“I’m asking a question, Lisa.”

She could see it in his eyes.

Jeff looked away. “I just don’t want some flashy guy coming into her life out of nowhere, and disturbing her at a time when she might be ready for a big break.”

“I know,” she said quietly, the thought weighing on her. “I wouldn’t want that either.”

They sat there together, each of them focused on the photographs of Tony’s face.

Lisa took a breath. “What if he *is* her break?”

Jeff didn’t respond to that. He slowly pulled himself to his feet, picked his keys up off of the coffee table, and walked out of the room.

\* \* \*

The room was lit entirely by candles now, but the light was only for them. Nikki had a steaming cappuccino in front of her, and Tony was sipping an espresso. Their faces glowed with the privilege. The restaurant had already closed for the night. They had the place all to themselves.

“I’m curious to know how one goes from being a bodyguard, and a day-trader, to the partner in a restaurant venture,” she said.

“Two restaurants, actually,” he said, with surprising modesty.

“Two restaurants,” she repeated, correcting herself as she teased him, “I didn’t mean to short you on your accomplishments. But I still want to know how you did it.”

“Wasn’t planned,” he said. “It just happened.”

“Care to explain that?”

“Maybe another time,” he said, smiling.

Nikki was still trying to grasp the concept. “And you’re one of the owners?”

“I am. And tonight,” he said, seeing her in the candlelight, “I’m thinking it’s been an excellent investment.”

He glanced around the elegant little restaurant.

“I don’t make a habit of doing this sort of thing,” he said. “I just couldn’t let you go so soon. And I found that I wasn’t above using a little influence.”

“Well, I’m extremely flattered that you used the influence for me.”

Tony’s head lifted in surprise.

“What?” she asked.

“Do you know what I just realized?” He looked slightly startled. “I haven’t introduced myself.” He laughed suddenly, reaching his hand across the table. “I’m Tony D’Angelo.”

Nikki took his hand, pumping it a couple of times, very entertained. “Nikki St. James. I’m happy to meet you.”

“This relationship seems to have started in the middle and then gone back to the beginning. That’s a new experience,” he said. “I hope you won’t hold it against me.”

“After a night like this, are you kidding? You’ve impressed the hell out of me.”

He seemed to take a harder look at her.

“I hope my language wasn’t offensive,” she said.

“I think *you* must be kidding now,” he said with a laugh, “Not even close. There’s something about a classy woman throwing a little ‘language’ into her conversation that knocks the socks off me.” He put his hands out on the table, palms up. When she slipped her hands into them, Tony closed his fingers, holding onto her.

“What’s it like being a bodyguard?” she asked.

“It wasn’t something I’d planned to do as a career,” he explained. “I took it on because someone I cared about needed protection. He asked me to do the job.”

“And you protected him.”

He nodded, looking over at her. “Your hands are cold,” he said.

“I know. They’re always cold.”

Tony kept hold of her while he talked.

“I would have done the job for free, because I owed him a lot. But he insisted I be paid. And I was paid,” he said, “Extremely well. At that time it made a huge difference in my life, and directly set me on the path to everything else that followed.”

“Day trading?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, “During the bubble. Made money for myself and my friends,” he explained. “Couldn’t miss at the time, you know. Millions made overnight, seemingly; then lost just as fast. The only thing that saved me from the same fate was growing up poor. I had never learned greed.”

He turned her hands over, looking down at them.

“Elegant fingers,” he said, holding her palms where he could see them in the light. “Looks like you’re going to live a long time.”

“You can see that?”

“I can.” Holding her right palm up, Tony ran a finger down her lifeline. “See this line? It runs all the way down your palm.” He turned her hand over. “And there it is again. It goes on forever.”

He was relaxed, enjoying her company.

“If you believe that sort of thing...” He left it hanging.

“Do you?” she asked.

“Sure,” he told her, “Why not?”

“What does your lifeline tell you?”

“Mine’s a little more complex,” he said, seeming to find humor in it. “I get to wait and see.”

Nikki had an overpowering urge to kiss him.

“Sorry,” Richard said, startling them. “I have an important message from Sam.”

Tony took the folded slip of paper from him. Holding it on his lap, he took a moment to read it privately.

“Thanks, Richard. Tell him I’m on my way.” He looked at Nikki. “I’m sorry.”

“Entrepreneur stuff, huh?”

“Indeed,” he said, with a sigh. “Looks like I’ll be out of town for a few days. I can’t believe the timing.”

“It’s okay.”

“I wouldn’t leave if I had a choice.”

“I’m fine, really,” she said. “I had a great time tonight.”

“And I’ll be back on Sunday.” He was looking into her eyes steadily. “We’re going to do this again, right?”

“Alright,” Nikki said. “I’d like that.”

“If anything changes, I’ll give you a call,” Tony said, pushing his cup back as he stood up. “Please stay and finish your cappuccino. There’s no hurry. Richard will put you in a cab when you’re ready to go.”

Richard was at the table waiting for him, holding a briefcase in his hands.

“Take care of her for me,” Tony said.

“My pleasure,” Richard assured him.

Tony turned to Nikki, with his eyes shining. “Answer your phone Sunday!”

“I will.”

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When Richard returned, he was in good spirits, holding a cup of coffee. Pulling a chair out, he joined her at the table.

“Okay,” he said. “What did you think of him?”

“Seems pretty wonderful,” she said. “How well do you know him?”

“He’s been a good customer for three years. Comes in several times a week...he’s a decent guy, generous with his tips, and always polite.”

“This is his table?” she asked, her face glowing in the candlelight.

“It is,” he said.

“If I ask you personal questions about him, are you going to tell him I asked?”

“No,” he said. “We don’t have that kind of relationship. In the first place, he wouldn’t ask me.”

“What’s the second place?”

“I’m not sure I’ve got that much information to share. He’s very private.”

Nikki took a few sips of her cappuccino while she organized her thoughts.

“Is he seeing anyone?” she asked.

“I don’t know. That’s not something I would ask him.”

“Is it something you’d tell me, if you knew?”

“Maybe,” he said, with a smile.

She smiled back at him. “Does he frequently bring women here with him?”

“No. He generally comes in alone.” Richard shrugged. “He likes the food. Beyond that, I don’t know a lot about him. Hey, I didn’t realize he was an owner until tonight.”

Nikki thought about that. “You’re not much help, Richard.”

“Well, excuse me.” He laughed. “I’ll try to keep my eyes open from now on.”

Richard finished his coffee then looked over at her.

“Now it’s my turn.”

“It’s your turn for what?”

“Information, naturally,” he said, grabbing her undivided attention. “Is Lisa seeing anyone in particular?”

“If she was, Richard, you wouldn’t be cooking dinner for her tomorrow night.”

“She told you about our date?” That seemed to please him.

“Of course,” Nikki said. “She’s my best friend.”

“Good to know. Would you put in a kind word for me?”

“I don’t think you need it, but I will,” she promised.

They sat quietly, looking across the table at each other.

“Do you think it’s too late for me to call her tonight?” he asked, finally.

“No. Even if you woke her up, I think it would be okay.”

Richard suddenly realized that she’d finished her cappuccino. “If you’re ready to go, I can give you a ride home.”

“Can you give me a ride to my car? It’s parked a couple of blocks up the street.”

“Sure.”

As Nikki followed him through the restaurant, Richard stopped briefly at each table to snuff out candles. She took the opportunity to finish their conversation.

“There’s just one thing I’d like to get straight before we leave. You’re going to be really nice to Lisa, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah. I like her a lot.”

“Because she’s coming off a relationship that did not end well, and I wouldn’t want to see her hurt again.”

He stopped just inside the front door, turning to face her. “I believe I’m an honorable man, Nikki. That’s certainly my intention. But the truth is that most relationships end at some point, unless you just happen to find that one person, you know? So, until that time, we can only do our best to be kind to each other.”

He held the door open for her.

“You’re a very nice guy, Richard. I like you.”

“I like you, too,” he said. “Now let’s get out of here.”

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