

1

Jessie couldn't shake the feeling of dread that was sweeping over her.

There was no reason why she should feel this way, she told herself nervously. She glanced at the group of law students who'd gathered at Vanderbilt University's Blackacre courtyard. She had been at Vanderbilt for seven years now; first earning an undergraduate degree and now she was within sight of graduating from law school. She was accustomed to the laughter and polite conversation with premier law firms who courted Vanderbilt's graduating classes. There was a gathering just like this every Friday night; it was a chance to grab a sandwich and chips, maybe a beer or two, catch up with classmates, and participate in impromptu interviews.

But tonight felt different. Jessie pulled her jacket collar closer to her neck and studied the sky. It was the last Friday before Christmas break and there was a chill in the air. She wondered if snow was forecast, but she quickly determined that her anxiety was not weather-related. It was something else; something she just couldn't put her finger on.

"It's not like you to be a wallflower. Care to tango?"

She recognized the voice before she turned to face Nick Rhodes. It was the voice she loved to hear more than anyone else's. It was gentle and soft, although he was over six feet tall and could easily have been a star quarterback. The moon caught his warm brown hair, casting strands of it into shades of deep auburn. His skin was darker than most, perhaps a testament to the Cherokee blood his mother insisted was in them, even if it was six generations deep. But his blue eyes were vivid and sharp, appearing understanding and probing all at once.

"I don't hear any music," she teased. "What would we dance to?"

"The beating of our hearts," he whispered, sitting beside her. He leaned in, planting a kiss just below her ear before his lips unhurriedly followed the line of her cheekbone.

She fought the impulse to turn to him as her eyes panned the students and potential employers. It wouldn't do for her to fall into his dizzying embrace just now, she thought.

But they reached for each other's hands simultaneously, each chuckling when they noticed the other's movements. She dipped her hands into his jacket pocket. It was nice and warm, and she inched closer to him.

"You're freezing," he said.

"I've been out here too long."

He wrapped his arm around her and they sat quietly watching the crowd dwindle down and any remaining warmth sneak away.

"You're still leaving tomorrow morning to go home, Jess?"

She peeked at him out of the corner of her eye. For some reason, just the thought of leaving caused her heart to sink. "You know I have to."

"Are you going to tell them?"

Jessie didn't answer, though she knew what he was referring to. They'd been dating for almost four years now, and her parents were no closer to knowing about Nick than the day she met him. "It's complicated," she said.

"Jess," he said, squeezing her hand, "are you ever gonna tell them?"

"Yes." She turned to look him square in the eyes. It was a mistake, she realized instantly; his eyes were dark and tortured.

"Yes, I am." She snuggled closer to him in an effort to block out the cold. "You know my dad's reputation. I have to find the right time."

"I know." His voice was soft, but she wondered if he truly understood.

Jessica Palmer was an only child, born to a privileged family that the locals referred to as "old money." Nick was everything her parents would have wanted for her, she thought: a kind, gentle soul with intellect, ambition and striking good looks—but he was dirt poor. He'd entered Vanderbilt's journalism curriculum on a scholarship; and what it didn't cover, he'd made up for by working part-time for *The Tennessean* newspaper. His mother had "mental issues," as he kindly put it, and he'd never known his father.

"Abby going with you?"

"Of course! I'd never leave my dog behind." She shivered. "You want to keep her here, don't you?"

He shrugged. "She'd make a warm body to wake up to Christmas morning."

"Oh!" she groaned, ribbing him. "I'll only be an hour away. And we have plans to get together Christmas Day."

He didn't answer, and after a moment of silence, she said, "Gotta get going. I need to get to my condo and let Abby out." As they stood, she reluctantly removed her hands from Nick's pocket and hunched her shoulders against the cold. She retrieved her half-eaten sandwich from the bench where she'd been sitting, and carefully returned it to its wrapper. Abby, her golden retriever, would enjoy it.

It was a short walk to the condominium her father had purchased for her several years ago, but now as they walked away from the others, it appeared darker than usual.

"Bet most everybody has already left for the holidays," she said.

"Yep."

Her heart felt heavy as they continued walking. Nick had been there for her every Friday night, waiting to walk her home. He'd been there every time she'd needed him. Why was it so difficult for her to tell her parents about him? It bothered her to

think that he had nowhere to go on Christmas break; that he would remain in his rented apartment just two blocks from her condo, awakening to a neighborhood that was deserted as students fled the campus for the holidays.

“Got any job offers?” he asked.

“A couple.”

“Seems to me, you’d go into your daddy’s business.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Oh, him owning that big old bank and all...and being an only child, seems like you’d want to keep the bank in the family.”

Jessie shrugged. “Maybe. I’m debating whether to work at the bank or take a job with a law firm. I’ve been getting some great offers.”

“Bet you have.” He nodded back toward the party. “You haven’t missed a chance to network.”

“Neither have you.”

They stopped at an intersection and waited for the light to turn, though the streets were almost deserted. As she stood there, moving from foot to foot in an effort to keep warm, a beige sedan whipped around the corner and stopped in front of them.

“Nick!” the driver called out as he rolled down his window.

“It’s Aubrey Shippman, from *The Tennessean*,” Nick said. “Yo!” he called louder.

“Boss wants to talk to you,” Aubrey yelled. “Been trying to reach you. Your cell phone dead?”

Nick grabbed Jessie’s hand and they crossed into the intersection, stopping next to the sedan. “What’s up?”

“Big story. He wants you to cover it. You’re goin’ full-time, partner.”

Nick’s face was a myriad of emotions. He appeared ready to jump into Aubrey’s car and take off for the newspaper building, but his eyes shifted back to Jessie. “I’ve got to take my girl home first,” he said. “Then I’ll get up with you.”

“Big stories don’t wait.”

“Go on,” Jessie said.

“No,” Nick answered. “I always walk you home. Always.”

Aubrey thumped the steering wheel with obvious impatience.

"I'm a block away," Jessie said. "Look, I can see the lights in my condo from here." She pointed. "I insist. Go."

Nick appeared to hesitate and Aubrey stepped on the gas, moving the car forward by a few feet. "Fate don't wait for no man," he called, rolling up his window.

"Go. I mean it," Jessie said, pushing Nick toward the car.

"You sure?"

"Go!"

Nick bounded around the car as Aubrey stepped on the gas again. "I'll call you!" he managed to say as he slipped into the sedan. The car sped off with Nick's door still open.

As Jessie stepped into the empty street, she felt a wave of apprehension return. "I've walked this way countless times," she said out loud, "and it's never been a problem." Though she thought the sound of her own voice would bolster her confidence, it had the opposite effect. As she reached the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street, she felt an eerie sensation building inside her, as if her gut was telling her to turn around and rush back to Blackacre. Instead, she focused her attention on the condominium building just up ahead. As it came into view, her eyes wandered to the brightly lit window on the second floor behind which Abby would be waiting for her.

It was completely silent. A street light was out near her condo, throwing the sidewalk into blackness. She shivered now as much from the feeling she couldn't shake as from the cold night air. She glanced behind her, almost expecting someone to be following her, but the sidewalk was empty.

Her mouth was dry and her heart began to race. This is so silly, she thought, half-irritated with herself. There were only two more buildings to pass before she would be safely inside her lobby. She inched closer to the street as she began to pass some ancient boxwood. She was halfway past them when a rustling caught her attention and her heart began to pound furiously. Two squirrels bounded out from under the bushes, and she chastised herself for being so jumpy.

But as she reached her building and took the short flight of steps up to the front door, she realized her hands were shaking so fiercely that she was unable to get the key in the lock. Calm

down, she told herself. She stared through the glass in the door at the pristine foyer. On the opposite side of the foyer was a wide mirror, and she caught her reflection. Slim. Her dark blond hair crossed over her shoulders and caressed her neck. People had always commented about her high cheekbones, but now, staring at herself in the mirror, she appeared gaunt. Her eyes were hazel, just like her father's—which meant they always appeared to be changing colors—from emerald green to vivid blue and everything in between. Now they appeared dark, almost brown, and wide.

Just get the key in the lock. You'll be inside in a second with the door closed behind you, she thought. One flight up was her condo, and behind that door was Abby. She would feel safe with her.

The key slid into the lock. As she began to turn it, she heard the sound of rapid footsteps behind her. She quickly turned the key and threw the door open. It banged against the inside wall and she rushed inside just as an arm cloaked in black reached toward her.

She whipped around. He towered over her, his broad shoulders extending the width of the doorway. And as she looked upward at his face, she realized in horror that he was covered completely in black from head to toe. A ski mask covered his face and only his eyes were visible—narrow, black eyes that matched his clothing.

She screamed and grabbed the door, ramming it against him. He stumbled in the doorway and as she tried to slam the door shut, his arm caught in the opening. She threw her body against the door, smashing his arm between the door and the jamb. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew Abby was barking ferociously; she wished somehow the dog could break through the condo door and bound down those stairs—the glass in the door cracked against her weight and the man's beefy hand grasped for her. She slammed the door against him again and again, his wounded cry strengthening her resolve to fight him off.

Why wasn't anyone coming? She thought frantically. "Call the police!" she managed to scream. "Somebody help me!"

The door was thrown open with such force that it hurled her against a condo door on the opposite side of the foyer. As he crossed the marble floor, she banged on the door. "Help me!" she screamed as Abby's barking intensified. "Help me!"

She turned, flattening her back against the condo door. Instinctively, she balled her hands into fists. Her mind raced; she had no weapon—no mace, nothing. Only Abby's doggie bag, a five dollar bill in her pocket and the keys that still dangled from the doorknob.

He approached slowly, without speaking.

She threw the sandwich at him but he easily ducked.

"I have five dollars," she said, yanking the bill out of her pocket. She tossed it on the floor away from her as she inched along the wall toward the open foyer door. "It's all I've got."

He paid no attention as he reached into his own pocket. He withdrew a sandwich bag not unlike the one she'd just flung at him. As she moved closer to the door ever so slowly, he opened it and quietly removed a handkerchief.

The odor reached her nostrils almost instantly, and she screamed again as she threw herself toward the open door.

He caught her and pitched her back into the foyer, throwing her to the floor. She screamed again and again as she fought him tooth and nail. Her fists pounded against him as he knelt on top of her.

"God, no!" she screamed. "No!"

She tightened her thighs against each other and grabbed his ski mask, poking her finger into his eye as she scraped her nails across his bare skin. The ski mask was askew now, and his wounded eye was tearing. She could hear his breathing as well as she could hear her own, and she redoubled her efforts.

But in an instant, his knees had her pinned to the floor and as he knelt over her, she saw the handkerchief nearing her face, the stench of ether so strong that she held her breath. She shook her head, trying to avoid the handkerchief, but as his hand drew closer, she suddenly turned and bit into him as fiercely as a snapping turtle. She held on for dear life as he yelled in pain. She would lose every tooth in her head before she let go, she thought frantically.

She briefly saw his free arm as it sailed through the air and pounded against her jaw, knocking her mouth free from his other hand. And then the world began to spin as the handkerchief was rammed against her nose and mouth. It was covered in blood, she thought. Is it his blood or mine?

Then Abby's barking sounded as though it was a mile away, and the foyer spun into shades of brown and then black.