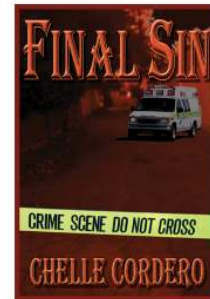
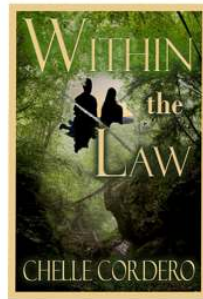
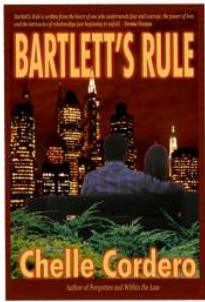


# CHELLE CORDERO



## FIRST CHAPTERS PREVIEW BOOK

Bartlett's Rule

Forgotten

Within the Law

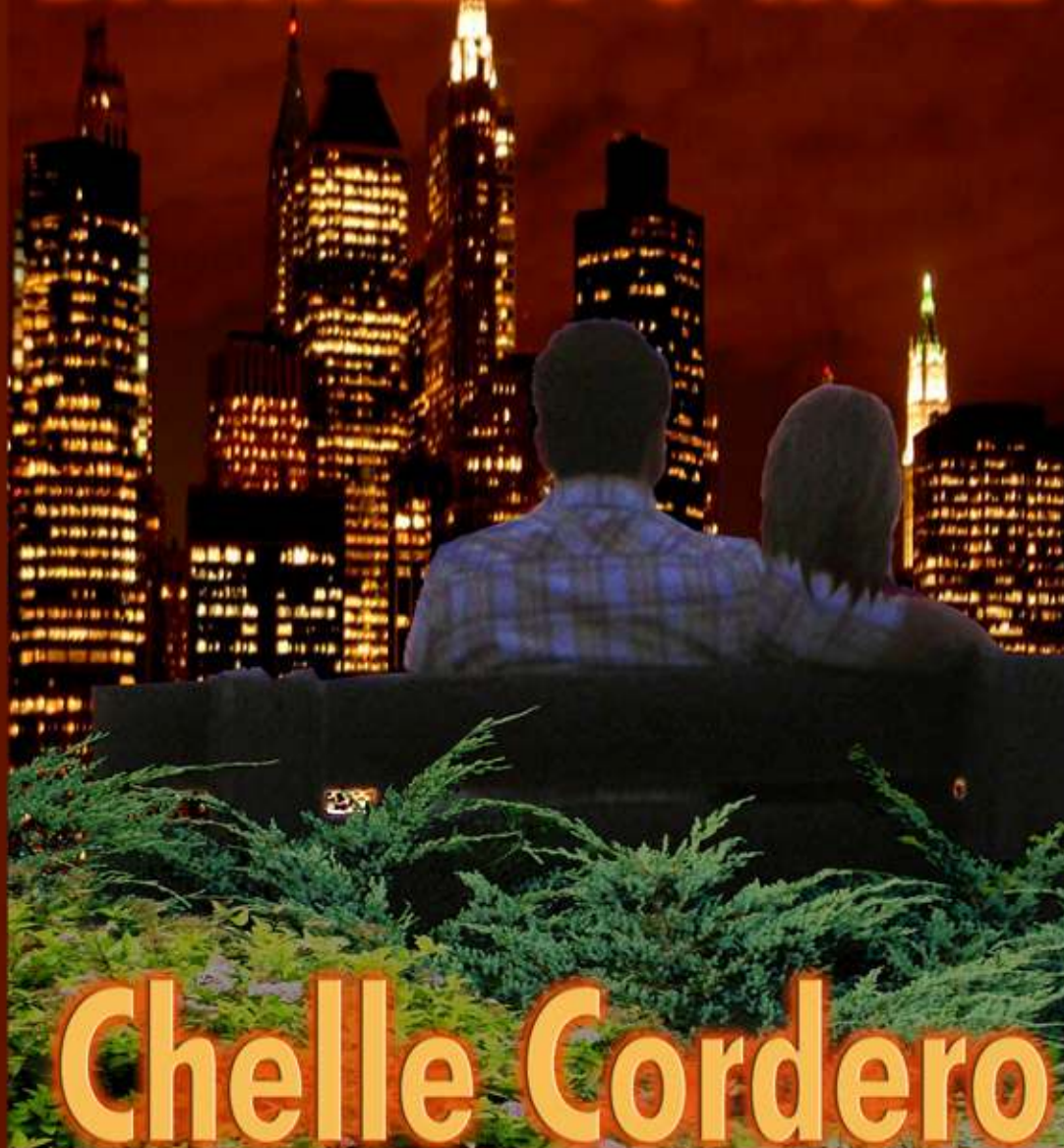
Courage of the Heart

Final Sin

Hostage Heart

*Bartlett's Rule is written from the heart of one who understands fear and courage, the power of love, and the intricacies of relationships just beginning to unfold. - Brenna Morgan*

# BARTLETT'S RULE



*Author of *Forgotten* and *Within the Law**

## Acclaim for Bartlett's Rule

“*Bartlett's Rule* is written from the heart of one who understands fear and courage, the power of love, and the intricacies of relationships just beginning to unfold. I highly recommend this book!” —Brenna Morgan

“Once I started reading *Bartlett's Rule*, I was completely drawn into the lives of these remarkable characters. Paige and Lon deal with many challenges in their quest to build a life together, and Chelle Cordero shares their world with us beautifully. The story flows easily and is both entertaining and thought provoking.” —Bradley Jameson

“Great story! I'll be looking for more from Chelle Cordero!” —Erica Jennings

“Chelle Cordero's *Bartlett's Rule* is a terrific book, just don't expect to put it down once you start reading. There is so much going on in the book, and yet it is written so well, so seamlessly, and with such style that I read it through the first time without even stopping to eat!” —Karen Mayes

# **BARTLETT'S RULE**

by

**Chelle Cordero**

**Vanilla Heart Publishing  
USA**

# **Bartleff's Rule**

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# Dedication

*To Mark*

*Your arms are the safest place in the universe.*

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank a very special group of people for allowing me the opportunity to live in my “fantasy world” and pen characters like Lon and Paige. I am lucky to be surrounded by wonderfully encouraging people.

Special thanks to my wonderful kids, Jenni and Marc for always finding a way to make me laugh. Thank you to my sister Bobi whose first words whenever I tell her of a new accomplishment are “I knew you could do it”. Thanks to my BFF’s Cheryl and Jamie for letting me rattle on in all my excitement when I create a new character or a new twist in one of my stories.

My deepest gratitude to Barbara Moroch, my editor at the Journal News and long-time friend for always believing in me and tossing work my way.

Last but not least, thank you to Kimberlee Williams from VHP who really made my dream come true.

# **BARTLETT'S RULE**

**By**

**Chelle Cordero**

## Prologue

“He is a pompous ass!”

“I agree. But he is also a big name and he has to be kept happy if we are going to pull this acquisition off successfully.”

Paige sat and fumed. She couldn't believe that Jeanmarie was asking her to charm and entertain this male chauvinist pig who penned a weekly column on how men were God's gift to women.

“Why can't you just buy him dinner and tickets to a Broadway show for him and one of his many adoring hordes?”

“Excuse me?” Jeanmarie grinned mischievously.

“I said hordes.” Paige emphasized the “D” sound. “Seriously, I'm sure that Lon Bartlett would prefer to choose his own company for the evening.”

“Paige that would be fine if we were just sending some executive a simple holiday remembrance but we need to court this publication. And if we want the publisher happy, we make his star writer happy.” She looked down at her phone as if trying to hurry the young woman from her office. “This requires a more personal touch. Take him out, wine and dine him. Do whatever you have to and make him happy.”

Slowly a frown settled on Paige's face. “I hope you're not suggesting...”



Jeanmarie laughed suddenly. "Oh gosh no! All I want you to do is schmooze with him a little bit. Make sure his evening is pleasant." She stopped and stared at the young woman pensively. "You know Paige, a lot of the women in the secretarial pool would die for this chance to spend an evening with a man like Bartlett. This is a great opportunity for you... professionally."

Paige bit the inside of her cheek to keep from retorting. She spent two years in the secretarial pool waiting for a promotion into the public relations department of this company. Of course though, she thought to herself, the first time she was given an opportunity to prove herself it had to be with someone whose ethics she couldn't tolerate.

"I just need to know that you can do this Paige." Jeanmarie had taken a huge personal gamble by pushing Paige's name when this opening came up.

"I'll make sure he's happy." She nodded even though she was filled with all kinds of self doubts. In reality, Paige wasn't worried about refusing the man's possible advances, she was afraid she would be tempted to accept them.

# Chapter One

He couldn't help staring at her through much of dinner. This young girl was an enigma to Lon. She certainly did not seem to fit into any of the stereotypes in his personal rulebook. She was certainly pretty the way the girl next door is with long brown tresses and big chocolate brown eyes.

Lon Bartlett had long ago assigned a ranking system to the women he encountered in his life and had often alluded to that in his weekly column. He was looked up to by the multitude of male readers who bought the magazine where his column was featured for his no-nonsense approach to handling the weaker sex. His draw was strengthened by the fact that he spoke from a reputed vast stockpile of experience.

At first Lon thought her reserve might be fear so he asked her to dance at the club almost as a challenge. He was surprised when she accepted without hesitation. She even allowed him to hold her close, but she was still holding back. It wasn't often, and certainly not recently, that a woman seemed impervious to Lon Bartlett's charms. Paige Andrews frustrated him and intrigued him at the same time.

"So, tell me a little about yourself, Paige." He smiled for her benefit. The entire evening had passed and he knew very little about her. There was no way Lon was willing to get out of the limo, say good night, and still feel so empty. "Personally, I mean. Not business."

She had done her best to court him for her boss and their conversation through much of the evening had been both relaxed and non-committal. But she felt much more comfortable not including any personal details about either one of them. The tabloids had already provided too much personal information about him. And she already considered him far too dangerous. “There’s not much to say. There’s certainly nothing that’s relevant.” She looked forward at the window that shielded their conversation from the limo driver. The young man was sitting patiently while he waited for a signal from her to open the door for their guest.

“Come on, I know this evening was all a show to keep me happy so your company can buy the magazine.” Lon knew that this purchase would benefit the new publisher even more than it would him so long as he remained on board. “It would make me very happy to know a little bit more about the woman Paige Andrews.”

This was what she had promised Jeanmarie. “And if I tell you my life history, will I be able to tell my bosses that you will remain on the masthead?” She found herself getting lost in the depths of his silvery grey eyes.

He chuckled. “Wow, you really do stay focused. Just how far would you be willing to go to keep me happy?” Lon noticed that Paige suddenly looked guarded. The smile she had been wearing, even if a bit reserved, faded. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to pressure you into anything improper. I didn’t mean it that way.” He didn’t understand why her retreat bothered him so much.

It took a few moments before Paige was able to meet his eyes again. But even Lon could see she was wearing a mask. She sighed. “I grew up in upstate New York on a farm. I have two older brothers. I also have a baby sister. I went to a community college here in the city and studied business.

Until six-weeks ago I worked in the secretarial pool at By-Lines Publishing. I just earned a promotion into their Public Relations department. And when my boss called me into her office yesterday to tell me I had to wine and dine you, I balked.”

Lon laughed. “I take it you are not a fan.” Not many women were quite that frank around him.

“No.” There was no hesitation. “Did I make you happy?” She smiled for his benefit.

He just smiled back at her. “I like your honesty although I am wounded that you aren’t an adoring fan.” She looked away again. “Why did you decide to move to the city?”

Paige swallowed. “I got engaged and my fiancé wanted to live here.”

“Oh.” He looked down at her left hand and didn’t see any ring. “Are you still engaged? Or married?” Lon was hoping the answer was no and he was pleased when she shook her head. “What happened?”

“That’s none of your business.” Paige hadn’t meant to snap. She caught her breath. “I’m sorry. I just would rather not discuss that.”

“I’m sorry if I intruded. But I am still happy the answer was no.” He noticed the surprise in her eyes. “May I see you again?”

She wasn’t prepared for his request. “Uh, I’d have to speak to Jeanmarie and...”

“No.” He cut her off. “You misunderstood me. I wasn’t asking about business. I’m asking you out on a date. Me man, you woman, we go out.”

“Uh...”

“A simple yes would be nice.” Lon smiled teasingly as he ran a finger along her cheek. “I like you and I would like to get to know you better.” He leaned forward and placed a very light kiss on her lips. “Friday night... dinner and maybe a movie. I’ll call you tomorrow at your office to get your address.”

It wasn't until Lon had swung the door closed behind him that Paige realized she had never signaled the driver to open the rear door. She also realized that she had never told him she would go out with him. But she knew she would.

The next morning when Paige entered the modular cubicle she called her office, there was a very large bouquet of daisies on her desk.

"Bravo." Jeanmarie appeared right behind her. "You obviously charmed him quite nicely." She smiled in approval at the vase of flowers. "I got the call this morning. So long as the numbers crunch right, Bartlett is staying on board. I knew you could pull it off."

Paige shrugged. "I'm glad, but I really don't think I did anything." She noticed a note card sticking out of the bouquet and reached for it. As she opened the card she looked towards Jeanmarie inquisitively. "Did you?... Oh." She refolded the card as soon as she saw Lon's name scrawled across it.

"Secret admirer?" Jeanmarie's curiosity was piqued.

Shrugging nonchalantly, Paige tried to ignore the anxious feeling she felt in her stomach. "Mr. Bartlett just sent a note to say he enjoyed himself last night." She didn't tell the other woman that the note really said, "Looking forward to Friday, Lon".

It was just after lunchtime when her phone rang. Paige reached across her desk to answer. "Paige Andrews, may I help you?"

"I hope so." The velvet timbre of his voice was unmistakable. "I can't stop thinking about this young lady I met last night. I needed to know if she's thinking about me at all."

It took her a few seconds to catch her breath and collect her thoughts. "It's hard not to think about you with this huge bouquet sitting on my desk."

He chuckled and the sound sent ripples of excitement along her spine. "Did you like them?"

"Like? Oh, the flowers. They're beautiful." She gazed at the bouquet that was the source of office gossip that day. "But you didn't need to..."

"You seemed so nervous last night when I asked you out. I wanted to offer you some refuge."

She was confused. "I don't understand."

"It's a Roman myth that a beautiful nymph caught the eye of a god, but she wanted to escape. So she turned herself into a daisy and hid amongst the flowers in the forest." He paused. She heard him take a deep breath. "I'm glad you didn't turn into a daisy."

Paige was very happy that she never stopped to take lunch, her stomach was doing flip-flops. "I guess I missed my chance to escape then."

"Most definitely."

She got the feeling that he was challenging her. In defense, she tried for a bit of brevity. "Of course you're not egotistical at all comparing yourself to a god."

He laughed. His laughter sounded so delicious to Paige and she was totally confused. How could a laugh sound delicious?

"I think I really like you Paige Andrews. I know I'm going to enjoy your company."

No matter how many times she told herself he was too dangerous for her, Paige couldn't manage to refuse to see him that Friday night. She offered to meet him at the restaurant. At least, Paige figured, she would manage to keep some distance between them by arriving and leaving separately. But Lon explained he was looking forward to a chance to use his car. He usually kept it garaged and enjoyed it when he got to drive it.

She had barely hung up the phone when Jeanmarie paged her into her office. Paige was given the task of helping to announce the upcoming

merger and Bartlett's arrival at By-Lines Publishing. The first order of business was researching Bartlett's personal history for a feature story to introduce him in the magazine.

Every detail that Paige unearthed convinced her even more that he was the kind of lothario that she had learned to detest. His reputation for seduction was unnerving. Even though he was adored by women and celebrated by men for his sexual expertise, Paige was convinced that his renowned exploits were no more admirable than any other dog in heat.

Friday night she made sure to greet Lon on the sidewalk when he drove his BMW coupe to pick her up for their date. His look of surprise should have felt victorious but instead she felt his disappointment. Lon stepped around the car to open the door for her.

"I'd like to think that you were just anxious to see me." His rough voice felt like a caress. "But I get the feeling that... that you were wary of being alone with me."

She refused to let him know how close he was to the truth. "Nonsense. I have no reason to be scared of you. I just know how difficult parking can be some nights."

He wordlessly glanced at a few open parking spaces along the block. Shifting his eyes back to her, he simply nodded. After he was once again seated in the driver's seat, Lon turned to her and asked earnestly, "I hope you like Japanese food." He actually looked worried until she nodded. "I've got a favorite little restaurant downtown I'd like to take you to."

"Sounds good." She wondered if his concern was only an act, just part of his seduction technique. "So long as I can use a fork and knife. I haven't managed to master chopsticks yet." She smiled to cover her nervousness.

He looked at her quietly for a moment. Then he spoke softly. "I'd like to teach you." His eyes lingered for a moment more and then he turned his

attention to pulling the car away from the curb. "Japanese chopsticks are actually smaller than what most people are used to... but I'll make sure you get a fork so you can enjoy your food."

Lon felt confused. Paige was a pretty young lady but he'd seen more beautiful women. So why couldn't he stop thinking about her ever since their business dinner date? Every time he closed his eyes, all he saw was Paige Andrews. He'd had the opportunity to date many attractive women, some of them were set-ups by his agent designed to boost his image. He really wanted to get to know this woman. It wasn't enough just to be seen with her in public.

They were both silent for the ride to the restaurant. The only conversation in the car was between Lon and the female voice of the GPS navigation system. He stopped in front of the restaurant and handed his keys to the valet.

At the entrance to the restaurant, Lon explained the significance of the restaurant's simple name, O-Tei. "The story of O-Tei is about two lovers who were fated to be together, even after she died. The girl O-Tei was reincarnated and met her betrothed seventeen years after he promised to wait for her. They married and lived happily ever after and she never even remembered her former life." He gently cupped her elbow and ushered her into the restaurant.

Paige was intrigued by his knowledge of folklore. She was also discomfited by the romantic ambiance and solitude of the semi-private room they were seated in. Even though Lon was a big man, he sat gracefully on pillows at the low Japanese style table set with woven placemats. The hostess brought a pair of wet face towels to them to freshen with before eating. Cups of steaming green tea were set before them. With her consent, Lon ordered for the two of them rolling traditional names off his tongue as if it were his native language.



Sipping from her cup of green tea, Paige looked at him.

"Is everything okay?" She nodded. "What are you thinking?"

She took another sip of the hot brew to fortify her and put her cup back on the table. "I was wondering who you really are? Somehow your reputation as a playboy doesn't fit with the man who recites Japanese tales and Roman mythology."

"And why not?"

She suppressed a chuckle. "It's too deep."

He frowned and then sighed. "Is there anything I could do to help raise your opinion of me?"

"Ouch." Paige grimaced. "I'm sorry. I'm being too critical."

He was surprised by her apology. "Maybe my publicist has done too thorough a job. Trust me Paige, it's all image. I'm not really a player."

"Lon, you're known for the art of seduction..."

"Are you afraid I'm going to seduce you?" He couldn't deny that he had thought of it.

She paused and answered him with more bravado than she actually felt. "I'm convinced you are going to try."

He laughed gently. "How about I make a promise to you?" Lon reached across the table and took her hand in his. "I won't even try any moves until our... our third date."

She glanced briefly at their joined hands. "Does this mean you are asking me out again?"

"It means I hope you will accept again." He gently caressed her hand, it felt so small in his own. Paige finally nodded and he smiled.

The waitress served their soup and appetizer before Paige could answer. She was quietly grateful. She gingerly tasted the steaming bowl of miso soup that was placed before her.

Somehow Lon knew that he should be quiet so he simply smiled. The appetizer of tuna roll, sushi and sashimi for two was served in delicate

little dishes and arranged like a piece of expensive artwork. He chuckled at her vain attempt to use chopsticks but before he could reach over the table to help her, she put them down and picked up her fork.

After dinner, he took her to a small theatre where they saw a newly-released independent film. Their conversation was comfortable and, he noticed regretfully, not entirely personal. At the end of the evening, he walked her to her door, waited while she unlocked it, then just leaned over and gave her a very chaste and light kiss. Then he told her he would call her the next day.

Before the end of the week, Lon's office was set up at By-Lines Publishing and they saw each other nearly every day. Paige insisted on keeping their dates a secret in the office. The following Friday he took Paige bowling. The Friday after that he took her to the theatre to see a musical comedy. She invited him up to her apartment that night when he brought her home.

Surprised and delighted, he wanted to be sure he wasn't misunderstanding her intention. "Are you sure?"

Paige paused and took a moment before she looked up at him. "You were good to your word. You didn't make any moves and this is our third date."

He gently caught her arm and stopped. "Hey, we didn't have any... business arrangements. I admit, I want to come up to your apartment and I would love to spend the night. But you aren't obligated." He frowned when she looked at his hand on her arm. "Is this what you want, Paige?"

She took a breath in and avoided looking into his eyes. "Are you prepared for us to... you know."

Lon let go of her arm. He wanted her, he wanted her badly. "I'm prepared." But was he prepared to be altruistic enough if this wasn't what Paige really wanted? "Let's go upstairs." He was ashamed of himself as he realized he was going to take what she was offering.

Paige forced a smile for his benefit but even he could see it wasn't real. She wordlessly turned and started up the stairs to her apartment. He followed her quietly.

As Paige put her key in the lock, Lon rested his hand on her shoulder. His voice was gentle. "Paige, are you sure this is okay?"

She paused with her hand on the key and still facing the door, she nodded. Then she opened the door and let him in.

Lon glanced briefly around the living room. Paige had left a dim light on near the door so she wouldn't return home to darkness. She put her purse and jacket on a chair and took his hand. She led him into her bedroom.



The book cover features a close-up photograph of a person's hand, adorned with a gold ring, resting on a white fabric with intricate lace detailing. The background is a blurred image of a large, ornate fountain with multiple tiers and statues. The title 'FORGOTTEN' is written in a large, blue, serif font with a black outline, positioned at the top. The author's name 'CHELLE CORDERO' is written in the same style at the bottom.

# FORGOTTEN

CHELLE CORDERO

## *Acclaim for Forgotten*

*Forgotten* is a riveting story and both my wife and I enjoyed it from the first page all the way to the last page. Ms. Cordero's characters have depth and real personalities and were very easy to get to know through her excellent prose and superb style. Every chapter, every paragraph, and even every word appears to have been written with the sole purpose of enchanting readers and drawing us into the story. – Jason Martin, new loyal fan and KerriAnne Martin, avid Chelle Cordero fan

What a great read! Thanks, Chelle! – Kristina Elleson

I read *Bartlett's Rule* and couldn't imagine another wonderful story that could match my excitement with that, but *Forgotten* sure accomplished the feat! Caitlyn and Brandon, along with all the other people in the book, feel like old friends now. Thank you! I can't wait for the next Chelle Cordero novel! – Hope Marshall

# Forgotten

by

**Chelle Cordero**

**Vanilla Heart Publishing  
USA**

# Forgotten

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# **FORGOTTEN**

**By**

**Chelle Cordero**

## ***Dedication***

To Mark and all of the unforgettable moments of our life.

## ***Acknowledgements***

Thank you to my wonderful support system and readers who have encouraged me and bolstered my otherwise fragile ego.

I am always inspired by my daughter and son, Jenni & Marc, and their significant others and the love stories they've woven.

Special thank you's go to my sister-in-law and friend Sue for coining the phrase "Forgotten – it won't be forgotten"; and to my Uncle Erv for his constant praise and encouragement and willingness to read romance. And a special mention of my parents who showed me the meaning of love and romance.

Special love to Whiskas whose furry warmth always kept my feet warm while I typed.

And of course, thank you Kimberlee Williams of VHP for turning this mere writer into an author.

## ***Prologue***

He felt his muscles clench as he stared into the woman's face that lay beneath him. If he hadn't already felt her trembling, he would have known she reached her own climax just by the expression of her face. With one more powerful thrust he felt everything he had spilling into her, he felt a completeness he would have never thought possible. Everything stopped and then he swore he felt their hearts start beating again as one. Pausing a moment to look into her eyes, and they were beautiful eyes he thought, he brushed a long strand of chestnut hair away from her face and kissed her. Then he rolled off of her.

"I love you." Her voice was soft, like the touch of her lips. He couldn't believe the tingling he felt in his loins at hearing her words.

"You're not even human..."

"What?" She almost laughed at his choice of words.

He hadn't even meant to say that thought out loud. "I mean... I just never felt so... consumed before. I feel like I am under some kind of spell." As he sat up to face her, he was surprised by the life he felt in his groin. Feeling a touch embarrassed, which was a new feeling for him, he admitted, "I almost feel like I can go another round, and considering how powerful that was..."

She faced him and gave him a sultry smile; her bare breasts were firm and small. But not too small, he thought, just enough to fill his hands. He felt his groin tighten again and just stared.

“Hey, are you okay?” She suddenly sounded self-conscious.

“Uh, yeah.” He forced himself to look at her face.

She touched his arm, her fingers felt light like feathers. “Can I do anything for you?”

“Yes.” He glanced at her breasts again and then back at her face. “Tell me... who are you?”

She laughed, it was a full-bodied sound. “Just one day married and...” She saw the surprise in his eyes as he looked at his left hand and saw the ring. Pulling the bed sheet up to cover her nakedness, she looked at him puzzled. “You’re serious?”

He frowned. “Fraid so.”

## *Chapter One*

“Was your last name really Smythe?” He looked from the marriage certificate to her and back again. He wondered if maybe she had checked into the hotel with him under an assumed name. After all, weren’t variations of the name Smith often used to hide one’s identity?

“Yes.” She sounded a bit defensive. She had pulled her hair into a loose ponytail and he thought it made her look incredibly young. Almost a little too young for his comfort.

“Hey look... Caitlyn,” he had to glance at the certificate again for her name. “All I know is the first thing I remember about you is that I woke up having really incredible sex with you this morning.” He certainly did remember the fantastic sex and how much he enjoyed it.

“I thought we were making love.” Her lip barely trembled.

He sighed. “It was wonderful, really. Look, I don’t mean to hurt you, but I don’t remember anything else.” Brandon, that was the name on the marriage license, stood. He felt frustrated. “I don’t know who you are, or me, except for these names on this paper. I don’t know why we’re here. I don’t remember these clothes I’m wearing. You told me that I drink my coffee black, I don’t remember that.” He knelt beside her and felt bad because she looked almost ready to cry. “I’m sorry. Really I am.”

She was a pretty girl, he thought. It was easy to see how she would have caught his eye. Her dark chestnut hair framed a nearly perfect oval

face. Her eyes were bright and her lips invited kisses. Her slender body and its womanly curves invited much more than just kisses. He felt that now familiar stirring in his groin as he studied her.

When she realized he really didn't remember anything, Caitlyn had been remarkably calm. She had gotten out of bed protectively wrapping the sheet around her, got clothes from a suitcase and went into the bathroom to get dressed. She had politely asked him to please get dressed and told him that the other suitcase was his. When she came out of the bathroom, neatly dressed in black slacks and a short sleeved pink blouse, she made a call to room service and had coffee, tea and some breakfast Danish sent up. While they waited, she showed him the marriage license, her wallet with her driver's ID and photos of the two of them. Even without his memory, he had to admit that they looked right together. She suggested that he check his own wallet as well. At least now he knew his name, birth date and where he lived.

After the bellboy wheeled the cart into the room, he gave Brandon the receipt to sign. When he hesitated, Caitlyn took it and signed. Her scrawled signature read Caitlyn Price. Motioning with her hands, she suggested that Brandon offer the bellboy a tip. He placed a few bills in the young man's hand. She reassured him he could afford it. Closing the door behind the bellboy, Caitlyn walked back to the cart with the coffee and teapot and the Danish tray. She poured him a cup of hot coffee from the pot and put two spoons of sugar in it, then stirred. Brandon sat in an armchair next to a small round occasional table. She selected cherry Danish from the plate of baked goods and served it to him on a china plate. After pouring herself a cup of herbal tea, she sat in the opposite armchair facing him. She didn't take any baked goods for herself. Brandon heard her tea cup rattle for just a moment. It was then that he first noticed that she was holding back tears, but he had no idea what he could do to comfort her or even if he should try.

She looked at him and sighed before putting her teacup and saucer onto the table. "We got married last night. You thought it would be romantic to do it in Vegas." Caitlyn twisted the small diamond ring she wore next to a simple gold band. "We've been seeing each other for almost two years and a few months ago you asked me if I would consider marrying you. We didn't make it official, but a few days ago, on my birthday, you showed up at my door with this ring and asked me to come with you to Vegas. I said yes."

She held her left hand out towards him so he could see the ring. He was tempted to take her slender fingers in his hand and caress them. The ring she wore was delicate, just like its owner he thought, and the stone was cut in a pear shape. The diamond was small, he thought, and yet she seemed to wear it proudly. Couldn't he have done better than a tiny diamond? Her gold band matched the one he was wearing.

He really tried, but he couldn't remember anything. "What about our families? Did we call them? Didn't your parents want to see you married?"

She looked surprised at his question and then shrugged. "My parents are dead, they have been since I was twelve. I was an only child."

"I'm sorry." He was sincere about that. "What about... do I have any family?"

"Your father is alive, but you've been angry at him and haven't spoken to him, I don't know why. As far as I know, you haven't seen him since before you moved to New York. I don't think you have any brothers or sisters, but I don't know because you really haven't wanted to talk to me about your family. You haven't really talked much about yourself."

Brandon looked at his driver's license again. Price, Brandon Price. He was twenty-seven years old according to his license. "Where did I grow up?" Maybe he should look up his family...

"You told me it was outside of Chicago, but you never wanted to talk about it. You were always kind of quiet about your childhood."

"Didn't that bother you?"

“It did. It does. That’s one of the few things we’ve always argued about.” Caitlyn knew how much she wished her folks were alive, but a drunken driver destroyed that possibility years ago. She couldn’t understand how Brandon could ignore a living parent. “But it also became one of those things we agreed to disagree on. You had just made it clear that the topic was off-limits.” She shrugged as if she had given up.

He looked through the rest of his wallet and saw that he had both cash and credit cards. “I assume I have a job. I hope so, especially if I can afford this.” While he apparently hadn’t gone so far as to reserve a suite, the room was certainly well appointed. The king size bed was definitely comfortable, and memorable. He glanced at the woman sitting quietly sipping her tea. She had seen his glance at the bed and the slight flush in her cheeks told him she was remembering the passion they had shared as well. “I didn’t see any business cards in my wallet.”

“You’re an IT consultant. I think you carry some cards in your jacket pocket, your suit jacket, it’s hanging in the wardrobe closet.” He hadn’t thought to look in the armoire when he chose clothes to put on; he had taken a pair of khaki trousers and a dark blue shirt from the suitcase. “I’m sure you brought some cards because you originally planned this trip for business. You have some kind of an appointment later today.”

“With who?” He went to the closet and found a suit bag hanging there.

“You didn’t tell me.” She paused. “You don’t talk much about your business either.”

Brandon found a packet of business cards, all they had on them was his name, the words Information Technology Consultant and a New York City phone number. He looked at her suspiciously, “I’m secretive about my family and I’m secretive about my job... How well do you really know me?” He couldn’t have sounded more accusatory.

Caitlyn looked hurt. “Obviously not well enough.” She looked like she was mulling over her next words. Finally she blurted them out. “How can



you not remember me?” She sounded frustrated. A lone tear finally rolled down a cheek.

“I can’t remember anything, damn it!” He slammed the wardrobe closet door shut. “Who the hell am I? And who are you?” He strode across the room to look out the window at the Vegas strip. “Right now, I can’t remember anything. I am relying on you to tell me everything and something tells me I am not the kind of man that relies on someone else very easily.” Even the circus-like lights outside the window looked foreign to him.

After a few moments of silence, he heard her soft voice. “I think maybe, then, that you are remembering something about yourself. You’ve never liked asking for help.” He never even heard her move and yet she was suddenly behind him. Her voice was quiet and reassuring. “I think you do some kind of work with government contracts, something with computers, but you don’t talk about it. Not to me anyway.”

He took a moment to calm the nervous churning in his stomach before he turned to face her. “Do you know if I work with anyone else? Maybe someone else can fill me in on some part of my life.” He was willing to grasp at anything to escape the feeling of emptiness he had. He had even had to compare the face he saw in the mirror to the face on the driver’s license she showed him to realize it was really him.

“You have a secretary.”

“I do?” He sounded anxious and slightly relieved.

“Her name is Amanda.”

He felt the hairs at the back of his neck stand up when he heard that name. “Amanda?” Although it was an overall uncomfortable feeling, the name Amanda evoked a strange reaction somewhere deep inside. “Uh, I hate to ask this but, well, is my relationship with her only professional?” Could something else be going on, something that raised the back hairs of his neck?

“It had better be.” She wasn’t joking. “Why don’t you call her? That’s your office number on the card. If she’s not there, you can leave a message and ask her to call you back.” Caitlyn motioned him to the phone. “I’m sure that you’ve shared some facts with her she probably needed for your business,” she added a little testily.

He called and left a message on his office voice mail. A woman’s voice greeted him in a recorded message. Somehow he recognized that it was Amanda’s voice. He remembered her voice, but how could that be when he couldn’t remember anything else? Caitlyn scribbled the hotel and room number for him on a paper napkin so he could leave it in the message. He finished his message and kept the phone to his ear through the rest of the recorded options. Wondering if his message sounded urgent enough, he thought about re-recording his message and then decided to let it stay as it was. He hung up the phone.

“I guess now I just wait.” He sat back down at the breakfast tray and resigned himself to the uncertainty. “How did we meet? Please, tell me everything through last night.”

“You know, I am really worried about you...” She came back to stand next to him. “Maybe you should go to the hospital? I don’t understand why you lost your memory?”

“No. I’m not going to leave this room until I figure out some things about myself.” The sights and sounds of whatever lay beyond the walls of the room nearly frightened him. There would be more people, more strangers, and more unknown routes to deal with. He felt safer staying put. He felt safe with this girl. Even though he still couldn’t remember her, he felt safe.

“But sweetheart, something is wrong...” She seemed to understand his reluctance to face more things he wasn’t familiar with. “I would go with you. I could keep telling you things I know about you, things you might even remember. I wouldn’t let you be alone.”

“I said no.” He hadn’t really yelled, but Caitlyn stopped short. “I don’t know what’s happened to me and right now, I just need to find out about myself. Please, talk to me.” He felt completely helpless. He was afraid of facing a bigger unknown world and getting permanently lost.

Caitlyn sighed and sat in the armchair facing him. He studied her as she spoke. He watched the way her lips moved, the expressions she made with her face. Nothing looked familiar. “We met at a college career day almost two years ago.” She saw his puzzled expression. “I’m an art student at a school in New York City, I was looking for a job. I had just moved to the city from upstate.”

He listened to every word and felt frustrated that he remembered none of it. “Did I hire you?” He toyed with the golden fabric covering the table. The room was decorated in golden earth tones. A watercolor of a lonely desert scene hung on the wall; it reminded him of how lost he felt. He wondered if that was the kind of art that Caitlyn studied.

She chuckled. “You weren’t looking for an artist, at least not a graphic artist.” He tried to imagine what she apparently meant by her pun on words, but gave up. “But you kind of monopolized my attention and before the day was over, you asked me to join you for dinner.”

“Did you accept?” He wondered what kind of man he was and if dinner had been his only invitation. She was a beautiful young woman and surely he must have been interested in more from her.

“I’m an art student... a starving artist. You offered a meal, I accepted.” He struggled to remember and then shrugged when he couldn’t. “You called me a few days later, just to talk, and then a few days after that you asked me out.”

He remembered that her license said she had just turned twenty-one. She looked so very young. “Last night... you said we got married?” Brandon looked again at the ring on his finger. Surprisingly, he felt very comfortable wearing it.

She looked into her lap. "We had spoken a few times about marriage, but we never set any dates or anything..."

"Why not?" Could he have been toying with her?

"I'm a student with a poorly paying job. I barely make ends meet. The first time we spoke about marriage, I told you I needed to wait, to become more self-sufficient. You made the offer to pay for my school and said I wouldn't even have to work. You kind of reminded me that you made a comfortable wage and could afford to let me do whatever I wanted." She grimaced. "I don't know, it actually sounded kind of insulting. It was like you didn't take me seriously. I accused you of trying to buy me and it's been a touchy subject since."

"What made you change your mind now?" He looked at her stomach. "Are you pregnant or something?" He felt a nervous pang that he might be about to become a father.

"No." She shook her head. That would be something he'd think of, she mused.

He looked straight at her and again thought of how young she looked. "Uh, this wasn't our first time together, was it?" Hell, what if she had been a virgin and he didn't even remember it!

She smiled shyly. "No, far from it. We've been lovers for a while now, although... you were my first." She let him absorb that information. "You were so spontaneous, you just showed up at my door with a ring and plane tickets. It... it was just romantic."

He struggled for something to say, but just like his memory, nothing came. Knowing how sweet it had been to wake up in her arms that morning, to be making love with her, he wished he could remember the first time that they were together. He hoped he had been gentle.

"The Good Reverend Elvis Presley Cosby married us."

He pictured the legendary rock and roll singer. He imagined the theatrical production that must have been. He laughed. "You're kidding!"

Although it was a fuzzy memory, at least he knew who Elvis Presley had been.

“No, I’m quite serious. Afterwards we went out to dinner and celebrated. You had quite a bit to drink...”

“I got drunk?”

She half nodded. “Not drunk but definitely... uh, you were definitely high.”

“After the ceremony?” He stressed the word after.

“Yes. You were fully aware of what you were doing when you said I do. You can’t use the excuse that you weren’t in your right mind when we got married. You had been very sure that you wanted it. I admit it didn’t take that much convincing, but you took the time to talk me into it when you showed up at my apartment with the ring.” She paused.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t accusing you of tricking me into this.” How could he be sure of that without his memory? But he was sure.

It showed that she was relieved he believed her. “I had never known you to drink so much that you lost control and I was really surprised when you insisted on having a drink before dinner last night, especially since you had that business appointment today.”

“Uh, my drinking, did it affect my, you know, performance?” It was embarrassing, but he didn’t even know what kind of lover he was.

She found it ironic that he was so worried about his virility. “You were fine in that department.” She blushed. “But maybe, just maybe you should be more worried that maybe the alcohol made you lose your memory?” Her body still tingled from his “performance” through the night.

“What did I order?”

“Before dinner, you ordered a scotch on the rocks...”

“I drink scotch?” A good strong whiskey... It was the kind of drink for a strong man with strong ties, a capable person. He was trying to get an image of himself.

“That and other stuff.” Caitlyn was remembering what else he ordered. “There was wine with dinner and a martini in the casino.”

“I was mixing drinks... and it got to me?”

She picked up the china cup with the rest of her now cold tea and drank it slowly. “We were in the casino. You wanted to play at the tables. That’s when you got paged to the hotel phone. You really sobered up quickly, you looked a little worried. You handed me your chips and some money, told me to play some slots or something and went to take the call. You were gone over half an hour...”

“Who called me?” Who was so important that he would he have left his new wife on their wedding night? The call must have been very important. And why would he be worried?

Caitlyn shrugged. “You didn’t say. When you came back, you rushed me up to the room. You said you had a headache from drinking, those were your words.” She frowned. “When we got up here, I offered you aspirin for your headache and you said you didn’t need it. You said the headache wasn’t really all that bad anyway. Then you laughed. It was strange; I didn’t know what you found so funny. You said you just wanted to make love. We did and then we fell asleep. You woke me this morning and said you wanted to be with me again... well, that’s where we are now.”

“I had a headache?” He didn’t feel hung over, not that he remembered ever feeling that way before. It just didn’t feel like he was suffering the effects of a hangover.

“That’s why I think you should get checked out.”

“But I didn’t want any aspirin? So it couldn’t have been that bad.” Maybe it was just an excuse to finally take his lovely bride up to their room.

“I watched a TV show once where this guy took sick and didn’t even realize it...” Caitlyn pulled her chair to sit directly in front of him. “Look at me.” She stared at his eyes, they looked okay to her and she nodded. “Squeeze my hands...” She took hold of both of his hands and rested them

on her knees. He squeezed both of her hands firmly. "You seem to be okay. I guess."

He wondered what had happened to him. He knew that she was checking for signs of a stroke and yet he didn't understand how he realized that. She was looking for an explanation for why he couldn't remember anything. He really felt fine except that he had no idea who he was or how he got there. There was nothing wrong with him that a little relaxation wouldn't take care of. Maybe a massage or even another tumble in the bed with this woman... the thought of making love with her again was tempting.

The phone rang and he practically lunged for it. "Hello?... Yes... Amanda thanks for calling me back." Her voice definitely resonated in his memory. He listened for a few moments. "No, I... forgot. Actually Amanda, I don't remember anything... no, nothing." And the few random memories he had gave him no indication of who he was.

He turned his back to Caitlyn and lowered his voice. "No, I'm not alone... I'm here with Caitlyn, uh, Caitlyn Smythe." He quickly glanced at her to see if she had heard him say her maiden name, she had. Oh well, he thought, I don't remember any marriage anyway. He looked away. "What?" Stealing another look at Caitlyn while he listened, Brandon managed to move a little further away. He listened for a few minutes, nodding and grunting every so often. When he hung up, he stared suspiciously at Caitlyn.

"What's the matter?" His stare discomfited her.

"Is your name really Caitlyn Smythe?" He wasn't sure if he should believe her.

She smiled. "Actually it's Caitlyn Price now." He remained quiet. "Brandon? What's wrong? What did Amanda say?"

"Why are you worried what Amanda had to say?" He was beginning to sound as paranoid as he felt. "Do you have something to worry about?" How much of what she told him was true, if any of it was? He had begun

to believe her, anything and everything she had told him, and it angered him that he now had reason to question her honesty.

“She barely knows me, what would she have to say?” Caitlyn was exasperated. “Brandon, what did Amanda say to you? What do you think I’m hiding?”

He wanted to trust the woman in front of him, he really did. He could understand why he liked her even if he had no memory of her. Her gentleness and supposed naivety had lured him into a feeling of safety. He said he had felt like he was under a spell during their lovemaking, maybe she was some kind of pro and he wasn’t thinking with the right brain. That other woman, Amanda, her voice was so familiar, how could he not trust her? He knew that he remembered Amanda. He didn’t know anything about Caitlyn before waking up this morning. And if he knew and trusted Amanda... then he couldn’t trust Caitlyn no matter what.

He paced in silence for a few minutes. Amanda had given him some information and he wasn’t sure what to do with it. Whether it was because Caitlyn was good in bed, he thought crudely, or because there was something more there, he decided to warn her. “Amanda is faxing some information to the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police. She expects that they’ll be here shortly to take you into custody.”

“Why?” She sounded totally dumbfounded.

“You’ve got a record. You’ve got a string of aliases...” He knelt in front of her. He was sure he had done the right thing to warn her. “Caitlyn, if you leave now, you’ll get away. I wasn’t supposed to warn you but I don’t want to see you arrested.”

“I haven’t done anything...” Her protest sounded genuine and it twisted his gut to think otherwise.

“Caitlyn, she has proof.” He thought for a moment and then stood to take his wallet out of his back pocket. “I don’t know how much money I have in here, but,” he pulled a wad of bills out and handed them to her. “You should be able to get somewhere with this. Go, go now while there is



still time. I don't know how far you can get but you have to get away from here." He put the money into her hand.

She dropped the money on the floor. "I'm not going anywhere, I haven't done anything illegal. Why would someone want to arrest me?"

He watched several bills float down to the carpet. "Damn it Caitlyn, I'm trying to help you!" Why didn't she just take the damn money and get the hell out of there?

Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "What did she tell you I did?"

He frowned. It was hard for him to make the accusation. "You are an artist all right... a con artist. Caitlyn, she said you stole from me, and you stole from some other people. And they want to press charges. I'm not but they are."

"You believe this?" She sounded so hurt, so wounded, and all he wanted to do was protect her.

He was consumed by guilt that he questioned her. "Come on, let's get out of here..." He tried to take her arm and push her towards the door. She pulled herself out of his grasp.

"No!" The tears welled in her eyes. "I thought you loved me. You married me! How could you believe I would steal from you?"

He took her by both arms and shook her. "I don't remember you!" Brandon stared in disbelief as he saw apparent fear in her eyes. He dropped his hands from her arms suddenly. "I'm sorry." He took a few steps back and spoke in hushed tones. "I know that it felt right to have you in my arms this morning, it felt good to be so close to you, but I don't know you. But Amanda's voice, I remembered that, I know her voice... and her name. I know Amanda. I have to trust her." His explanation lacked conviction.

There was a firm knock at the door.

"Go hide, I'll tell them you left."

Another knock. A single man's voice called through the closed door. "Hotel security."

“Please Caitlyn...” He motioned for her to hide.

“No.” She stood where she was. “I haven’t done anything.” She sounded almost convincing to his ears, But he worried that she wouldn’t be as convincing to the police.

She stood there defiantly.

After a few more knocks at the door, Brandon answered it. Caitlyn stood silently. Two Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Officers entered with the hotel detective.

The hotel detective stood back while the two police officers asked Caitlyn a few inane questions to confirm who she was. One of the police officers frisked her and nodded in satisfaction when he didn’t find anything of danger.

Caitlyn looked confused and scared.

The second officer had a copy of a forged check and a New York City Police report with Caitlyn’s picture on it. He read a list of charges out loud which included theft, embezzlement, forgery and passing bad checks. Her rights were read to her. They called her Mary Jones. The name under the picture on the NYPD report was Mary Jones.

She went to reach for her purse claiming she had plenty of identification to show them. One of the officers caught her wrist and cuffed her. He twisted her arms painfully behind her and cuffed the other wrist.

“My roommate... she’s traveling in Africa right now, but I’m sure we can track her down.” Caitlyn winced as the cuff tightened from her struggling. “Keisha can vouch for who I am.”

One of the officers mocked her. “Keisha?” He looked towards his partner. “Doesn’t even sound American to me.”

“I have family in upstate New York...” Despite her protests, Caitlyn was led from the room.

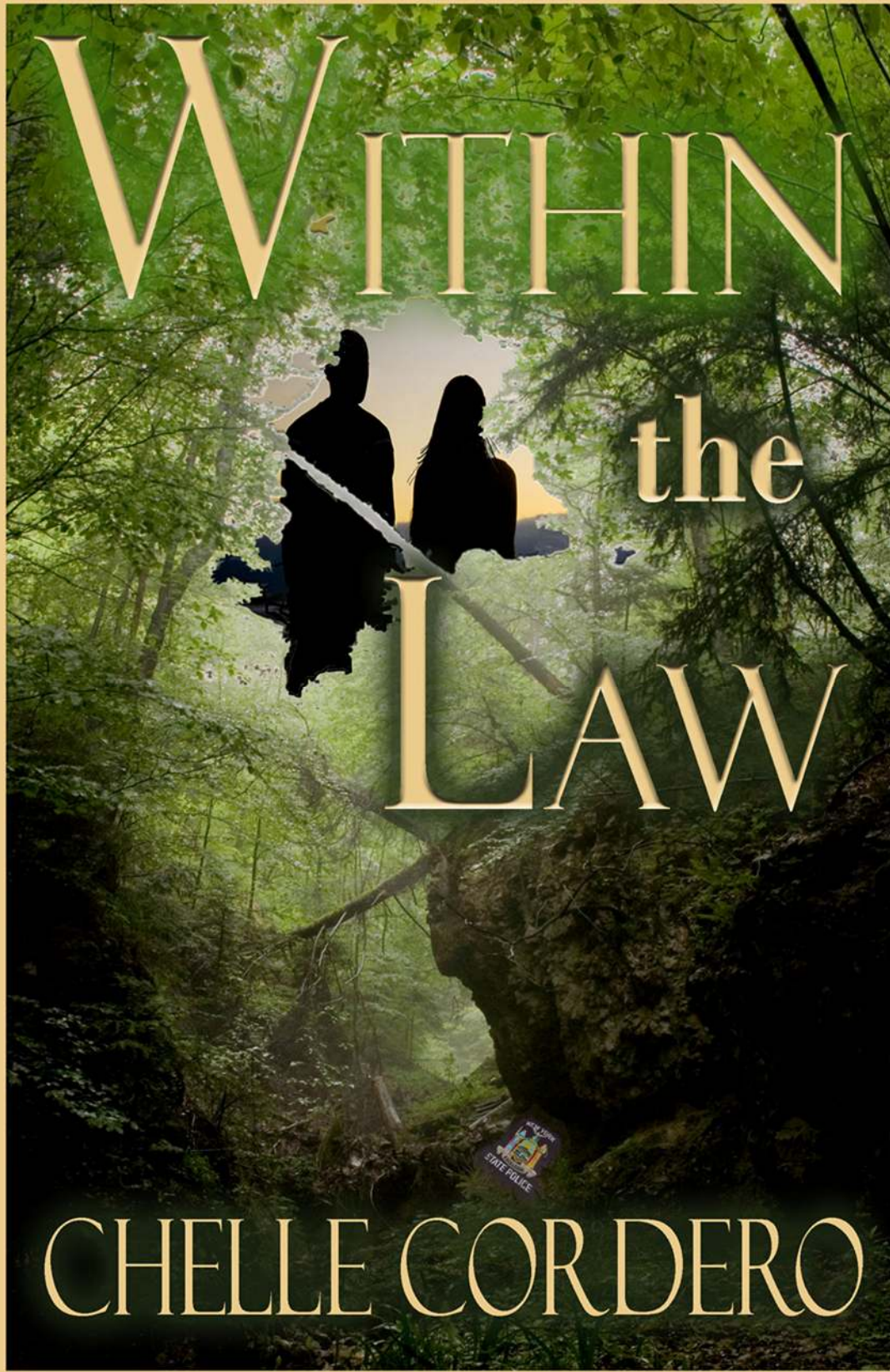
Brandon couldn’t stand the tears he had seen on her cheeks. She had seemed so bewildered, not like she was hiding anything. When the door

was closed behind them, he sat on the bed with its still rumpled sheets and felt even more lost and more alone than he had before. Eventually he realized that he wasn't the type to sit and wallow and it wasn't long before he left the room on a mission.









## Acclaim for *Within the Law*

"I loved *Bartlett's Rule*. I loved *Forgotten*. I knew I should expect another amazing story from Ms. Cordero, but I didn't expect such a beautifully poignant and yet, at the same time, such a realistic novel of love and danger, adventure and intrigue! Chelle Cordero has a gift! My husband enjoyed *Within the Law*, too, and he doesn't enjoy many of the books I choose, but told me this wasn't 'your typical mushy girl book' and was easy for him to read. He passed it on to his brother even!"  
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# Within the Law

by  
Chelle Cordero

Vanilla Heart Publishing  
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# Within the Law

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## Dedication

As always, to Mark and his persistence in  
convincing me to make it legal.

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And once again I have to thank Kimberlee Williams who has made this transition in my life to author so painless and for her friendship and never-ending support.

## Prologue

He put his hand on the bartender's wrist as she moved the open bottle towards his glass to refill.

"That's going to be it for me, I've got an early morning." He removed his hand from her wrist and watched as she pulled her slender hand away, noting the bright red of her nails. He remembered seeing red nails like that before. It was the same red as the cherry that topped the ice cream sundae you took your girl out for on a hot summer night. It was the same red as the Ruby stone that sat in a high school ring.

It had been more than eight years since he had seen that high school ring. She had been wearing it on a gold chain around her neck as she kissed him and told him she'd see him later. He waved as she got into the car with her friends and they drove off. Even though it had been a girls' outing, he was supposed to drive them that day. One of her friends was planning to move into the dorm at the university in Syracuse later that summer and they all had wanted to help her make purchases for her room. But the restaurant manager had a last minute opening and he was grabbing all the work he could. So he stayed behind. He stayed behind and worked so they would be a little bit closer to being able to afford getting married.

His high school ring was never supposed to replace her engagement ring. He had been planning on buying one. But they wanted to move the wedding date up. They needed the money so buying the diamond was put on hold. Tom was still working the busboy job that had carried him through his senior year of high school. He had applications in at lots of other places for full time jobs, but the summer wasn't the best time to get hired. His dad had wanted him to go on to college, but college wasn't in his plans. Not anymore. He proposed to Joyce on their high school graduation day.

Joyce's parents tried to convince them each to go to the local community college. They kept telling them that a two year engagement wasn't all that long after all. Tom and Joyce knew they couldn't wait the two years. So he worked as many hours as he

could as a busboy. He managed to pick up a few extra hours pumping gas at the local station also. Joyce babysat and she was going to start selling plastic kitchen containers to all the area housewives. She wasn't planning to buy anything that day. She was just going along for the ride. She was just going to enjoy the day with her girlfriends. He wanted her to have fun.

He was dead on his feet after the shift at the restaurant and he just wanted to go home and watch TV. His mom called him before he left work. His fifteen-year old cousin had run away again, something she did an average of twice a week since coming to live with them when she was twelve. Tom always knew where to find her and he picked her up on his way home that night. They were sitting in his car while he once again lectured her about her behavior when the police car pulled up. Tom knew that his world was about to end when he saw Joyce's father get out of the back seat.

# Chapter One

The courthouse was already closed by the time Tom had driven into Rome, New York. He knew it wouldn't have made a difference anyway. The district attorney's office had been very specific about what time they wanted to see him. All they wanted him to do was identify the Tupper Lake High School ring with his initials engraved in it. All he wanted to do was get a look at the guy who had changed everything in his world. Tom had an almost masochistic need to put a face to the lowlife who had turned every dream he had into a nightmare.

Tom looked at his wristwatch and decided that as tempting as it was to drink himself into total numbness, he wanted to be aware enough the next morning to really get a good look at this guy. He'd been waiting eight years. Throwing a couple of bills on the counter, he paid for his last drink and stood. He took his car keys out of his pocket and weaved his way through the crowd towards the door.

Tom knew he was comfortably buzzed enough not to drive, but he also knew he had to get out of the bar before he lost total control of his emotions. He figured he'd see how he fared once the outside air hit him and if he had to, he'd just roll the car down the street to the empty parking lot of a closed supermarket and sleep there for the night.

He stood on the sidewalk outside of the bar and let the cool night air absorb him. The Subaru was parked just a few car lengths down. He decided that if he managed to put the key in the lock on the first try, he'd be okay to drive. When he first heard her, he thought he was imagining the sound. Then Tom was sure that he heard a woman sobbing. He continued down the block until he saw her.

She was on her knees and he could see that she was trying to stand but what looked like a broken shoe and a bloodied knee wasn't helping.

The woman, an attractive blonde, seemed scared when she first saw him approaching from out of the shadows. She tried to stand again and he watched as her ankle turned in and she groaned. Her knee-length tan skirt showed dark smudges from the dirty sidewalk.

"Don't come near me."

Tom stopped where he was. "Hey lady, it just looked like you needed some help."

"I'm fine." She managed to get to her feet. She was tall, maybe about five-foot-eight, he thought. Her stockings were ripped over her knees, one knee was bleeding and the contents of her

pocketbook were spilled out over the broken sidewalk where she had tripped. "Thank you, but I don't need your help."

"Okay." Tom leaned against a parked car, crossed his arms and watched as she struggled to remain in an upright position and pick up her belongings at the same time.

The woman almost fell again and Tom lost patience. He came to her side.

"I'll scream for help." She looked frightened by him.

"Go ahead." Tom stared at her for a full minute. Finally after nothing more was said, he bent to pick up her spilled possessions and put them back into the wayward purse. "Do you live around here?" He handed her the pocketbook.

She hesitated. "No. Why?"

"I was just wondering what a woman alone was doing out on these streets at this hour." He raised his eyebrows.

"I don't like your insinuation." She looked around and seemed to realize how dark and isolated the streets were. "Not that it's any of your business, but I had an appointment."

"Okay, let's get you home." He surprised her by cradling her in his arms. "My car is right over here." She was a lightweight to carry.

"Put me down."

"Yeah... sure." He walked over to his car and put her down next to it. "You have your choice. I can drive you home. Or you can try to hobble along these dark streets by yourself. I can assure you I have no interest in attacking you. I can't guarantee anyone else you might run into in this neighborhood at this hour." This was an older part of town with lots of alleys and shadows to contend with. It was down near the courthouse and jail and had a forbidding feel to it in the dark.

She turned her head to look around. A few men stumbled out of the bar and headed in the opposite direction. "I don't live far from here." Their raucous laughter seemed to unnerve her. He noticed her slender hands which seemed much more suited to typing at a desk than defending herself on a dark urban street.

"So it won't be a long drive." He unlocked the passenger side door of his car and was pleased that he got the key in on the first try. He uttered silent thanks that his hands were steady enough and he wasn't really feeling any of the affects of the alcohol. "By the way, my name is Tom."

She sat in the car and just before he closed the door, she cautiously smiled. "Thank you Tom." He couldn't explain why, but he knew that was the kind of smile he would remember and enjoy.

It wasn't far to her home. She gave him directions as he drove. Their path took them just past the local hospital to a small garden apartment complex. He parked in front of one of the Tudor style buildings.

"Thank you again." She opened the car door and stepped out. She had to lean against the car when she found her ankle wouldn't support her weight.



Tom got out of the car and came to her side of the car quickly. He cradled her again ignoring the gasp of her surprise. "Would you like to go to the hospital to have this looked at?"

"No." She seemed to relax in his arms. "No thank you. I'll just stay off of it tonight. I'll be okay."

"What floor?"

Resigned to the fact that she did need help after all, she told him. "Second floor, rear apartment." After a moment, she added "thank you again," and loosely put her arms around his neck.

"Okay." He carried her into the building and up the stairs. "Do you mind if I ask your name?" He really wanted a name to call this ethereal wisp of a woman.

"Alli"

"Nice to meet you, Alli." He brought her to an apartment door. Tom stood there with her in his arms, enjoying the feel of her arms around his neck. Finally he looked at the apartment door. "Do you have your key?" There was a tinge of amusement in his voice.

"Really, I can manage..."

"I'll just put you on your couch, get some ice for your ankle and then I'll leave. Boy Scout honor." Tom grinned. It was for his own benefit, he thought, to get in and out as quickly as possible. He was enjoying the feel of her in his arms entirely too much.

Alli thought about it before she pulled a key from her purse and unlocked the door. The door opened onto her living room. As he bent to put her on her couch, she started to chuckle. "Gee, if I had realized you were a boy scout, I wouldn't have given you such a hard time." He put a throw pillow behind her head.

Tom pointed towards what appeared to be the kitchen. "Ice, that way?"

"Yes."

He went into the kitchen and noticed it was immaculate. All the appliances matched with brushed metal finishes. The surfaces were pristine. The room looked like it belonged in a magazine layout. A hot and cold water dispenser sat in the corner of the room, no simple tap water for this lady. It was certainly not like his place at home where his mom had picked out a stark white fridge and he relied on well water for drinking. He came out a few moments later carrying ice wrapped in a kitchen towel and a plastic grocery bag. "Here, put this under your foot so the ice doesn't get everything soaked." He put the bag under her leg and then wrapped the towel and ice around her ankle. "Okay, I'm out of here...:"

"Tom, thank you. I'm sorry I was being so difficult before." He liked the way his name sounded when she said it.

He smiled at her. "Don't worry about it. I understand."

"I just never expected to find a truly nice guy..." He hid his disappointment at her words. A nice guy wasn't the way he wanted her to see him. He would have preferred a handsome guy, an attractive guy, a sexy guy... Nice was just so bland.

"Don't sweat it." He looked around the room. She had a delicate collection of spun glass figurines on display in the living room. He thought of how the type of collection suited her, very beautiful, very intricate, very fragile. Probably very expensive. "Can I get you anything else before I leave?" He noticed that she had a few photos on display, probably family pictures. The frames were all highly polished chrome and silver. Except for an older man next to an older woman, she didn't seem to have any pictures of a special man in her life.

It looked like she wanted to say something else but changed her mind. "No thanks."

"Bye Alli." Discouraged, Tom left.

"Bye."



Tom went back downstairs to his car. Fortunately he had reserved a motel room by phone before he left home or he really would have to sleep in his car. He passed an all night convenience store on his way to the motel so he stopped and got himself a cup of coffee and a sandwich to bring back with him. He had never stopped for dinner and his gut was beginning to burn from the alcohol. While he waited for the sandwich to heat in the store microwave, he realized he would have jumped at even the slightest hint of an invitation to have stayed in her apartment. He had been feeling especially lonely since he first got the phone call about the ring.

He picked up his key from check-in, left a request for a wake-up call at the front desk and went to his room. He turned the TV on and put his feet up on the bed to eat his food. Thinking about it, he realized that Alli should never have let him pick her up and put her into a car. He sure as hell should never have put a woman into that position. He should have known better. There were sick predators out there waiting to hurt innocent women. But maybe, just maybe, because he was so pushy, he did save her from someone else who might have come along.

He also realized that, just for the short time he had been with her, he really felt an ease he hadn't had since the phone call about the ring. He had only known her an hour or so and already she was indelibly etched in his mind. She was a heck of a lot fancier than most of the women he knew. Even rumpled and ruined from her fall, her clothes were very businesslike. Her furnishings looked like they had been carefully selected by some expensive designer. Maybe that was why she stood out in his mind. The women he usually associated with in his hometown were much more casual in their dress. This Alli was just... put together so well. He was still curious what kind of an appointment she might have had at that hour in that neighborhood.

Tom felt like his mind was going in a dozen different directions at once.

He wondered how Alli would feel if he were to show up at her door again the next night. Would she welcome him or tell him to get lost? He was a small town, blue-collar kind of guy.

Maybe he could bring flowers, ask about her ankle, invite her to dinner... He would see how he felt after the courtroom. He would see how he felt after he identified the ring. He had a feeling that no matter what the results were going to be in the courtroom, he would be tempted to seek her out again. It boggled him that she had such an effect on him.

He pulled his wallet out and studied a yellowed picture he still carried from his high school days. Joyce was beautiful. How he wished that someone had come along who could have helped her that fateful day. How he wished he had driven her and her friends to Syracuse. Maybe if he had been with her that day... He would never forgive himself for having stayed behind. She had been so disappointed when he explained that it was a chance to earn some money towards their goal and he wouldn't be coming along. But she told him she understood and she put a smile on her face just for him. That smile was all he was left with.

Joyce's father had come to tell him that she had been abducted from a shopping center parking lot. He and her father had driven to the mall where she was last seen. They spent the next two days camped out at the local police station waiting for word of her fate. Then the detective had come in to say that a young woman's body had been found by the side of a road. Tom would never forget the expression on her father's face after he identified his daughter's body. Tom asked to see her. She looked like she was sleeping, just sleeping. She was a beautiful angel just sleeping. He couldn't let himself cry. If he cried, then that would have meant things were wrong. She was going to wake up. Tom didn't want to leave her side. He wanted to wait for her to open her eyes. He wanted to stay and tell her how much closer they were to their goal because he had stayed behind to earn some money.



Tom stood outside the courtroom the next day and studied the faces of everyone who entered. He saw familiar faces from his high school years. Some of the faces he saw still belonged in his hometown of Tupper Lake, in Joyce's hometown. Two of the girls that had gotten into the car that day with Joyce walked through the lobby. They had both moved out of the area as their lives got busy. They nodded to him in recognition and sent little waves and obligatory smiles towards him. They were older, probably married, probably in careers. Just like Joyce should have been.

He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He watched as Joyce stepped out of the elevator. She looked the same as she did back then. He stood there in disbelief feeling a lump in the back of his throat. He wanted to take her in his arms and celebrate her return. She saw him and smiled. It was only when he saw Joyce's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Keller, step out of the elevator that he realized the young woman was Joyce's baby sister. He hadn't seen her since she was eleven years old. She had grown up to look just like her sister. Eight years, she was just about the same age now as Joyce was when she died.

"Tommy!" Kristen Keller recognized him and came running over to give him a hug.

He hugged her back wordlessly when he found he couldn't speak. He was still in shock over the resemblance.

The Kellers came to greet him. Mrs. Keller barely smiled. She was an attractive woman and he knew Joyce would have aged beautifully some day as well. He knew that seeing him brought back so many more memories. Every time she saw someone or something that reminded her of the daughter she had buried, she suffered anew. He knew she would always hurt.

"How are you Tom?" Mr. Keller asked. "How are your folks?"

"Fine. My parents are doing well. They retired and moved to North Carolina." Tom's father had been in the logging business and had worked hard all his life towards retirement.

Mr. Keller smiled. "That's good. They deserve some relaxation. How are you doing? What are you doing with yourself these days?"

"I wound up working with the State Police. I took the test and did well." It certainly was a more stable job than working as a busboy in the seasonal restaurant business. He hadn't had much to offer their daughter so many years before.

"A Gray Rider. Nice." Mr. Keller nodded in approval using the common term to describe troopers.

"Are you married?" Mrs. Keller asked suddenly.

"No ma'am." He hadn't found anyone special since Joyce. "I don't know if that will ever happen." How could he tell her that except for one unexpected woman, he always found himself comparing every other woman to Joyce?

Her parents had taken their two younger daughters and moved immediately after Joyce's funeral. Tom had tried to stay in touch with them. His cousin had been friends with one of their daughters, Stephanie. Steph called Cat one day and asked her to stop Tommy from calling. Her mother wasn't handling things emotionally and the reminder of what she had lost was too much. So Tom didn't call again, he let go of the last ties he had to Joyce. He had wanted to hold on but he couldn't cause them any more pain. He already felt responsible enough for their sorrow.

Her eyes misted. "They told you that they caught the monster that hurt my baby?" Joyce's mom had aged much more than just the eight years that had passed.

"Let's hope they put him away for a long, long time." Her father continued.

"I hope they give him the electric chair." Kristen added her opinion.

Tom heard the venom in her voice and he understood. But he still had to let her know. "New York doesn't have the death penalty, Kristen."

"But he killed my sister!" She pouted and reminded Tom one more time of her older sister.

"I know." Tom also knew that no matter what punishment he wished on this guy, it would never return Joyce to him. It would never bring back the future they had ahead of them. "Where's Stephanie?" Their middle daughter didn't seem to be with them.

Mr. Keller smiled broadly. “She joined the marines. She’s stationed in Iraq. She’s due back in a couple of months.”

“Wow.” Tom shook his head and remembered all the times Cat and Steph caused all kinds of havoc because neither of them wanted to follow the rules. Now one was a marine and the other was helping her husband run a business and had a baby on the way. Both of them had definitely grown up. That was something he and Joyce had wondered whether it would ever happen.

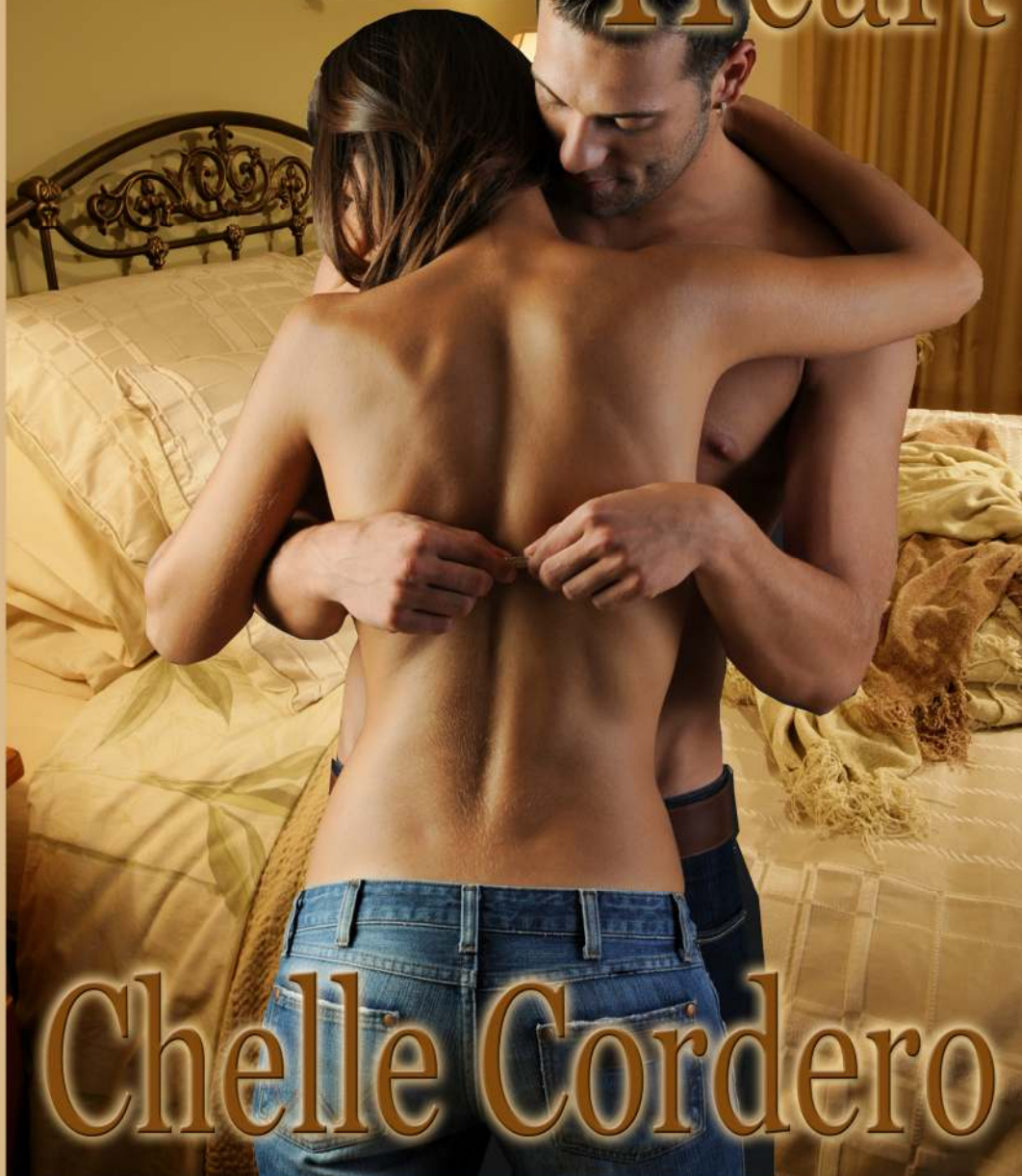
Joyce’s dad put his arms around his wife and daughter. “We’re going to go take our seats now. We’ll see you inside.”

He watched them enter the courtroom. The rest of the lobby had nearly emptied while they were busy talking. Tom decided to go in and take his seat. The District Attorney and his assistant were seated at the table up front on the left. He saw a small man seated between who he assumed to be two defense attorneys at the table on the right. The first lawyer was an older man with thinning gray hair and a suit that certainly had an expensive designer label. The other lawyer was a tall, blond haired woman. Even from behind, she looked attractive and very well put together. When she turned her head, Tom recognized Alli.

She didn’t see him. Tom was incredulous that this was the same woman he had helped the night before. He had been concerned with protecting her from scum like the guy who killed Joyce and now she was sitting on the defense attorney side. She was defending that same scum and looking to send him back out on the street. He had thought she was fragile and delicate. Alli was an attractive woman. She felt good in his arms. He felt as if he had betrayed Joyce, he hadn’t thought of her once while he had held Alli. For a brief time last night, Tom had thought of asking for her phone number and suggesting the possibility of seeing her again. Boy was he glad he hadn’t. And then he was sorry that he hadn’t.



# Courage of the Heart



Chelle Cordero

## *Acclaim for Courage of the Heart*

Fantastic re-release of Ms. Cordero's Debut Novel, *Courage of the Heart*! Revised, updated, and skillfully expanded, Chelle gives us another amazing story...nine years later...and well worth the wait!

*CL Borden, author and reader*

I've been lucky enough to have been selected as Beta Reader on each of Chelle's VHP novels so far, and *Courage of the Heart* does not disappoint! She's incredibly skilled at creating characters readers feel they know intimately, connect with, and enjoy!

*Michelle Martin*



# Courage of the Heart

by  
Chelle Cordero

Vanilla Heart Publishing  
USA

# Courage of the Heart

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# Dedication

To Mark, You've always managed to allay my fears. I love you.

# Acknowledgements

To my kids, Jenni and Marc – I have always marveled at your sense of adventure and your daring. You may have contributed a few gray hairs now and then, but you have also inspired me to reach for my dreams.

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In memory of my grandfather, Rafael Rudick, a man I never met, but whose story of great courage to save a young man's life in the Deep South of the 1930's has always motivated me to help my fellow man.

Finally my gratitude to Kimberlee Williams - a publisher, mentor and friend.

# Courage of the Heart

by

Chelle Cordero

# PROLOGUE

He trailed kisses down her neck while he let his hands explore the recesses of her body. Davie shuddered when he found the warmth between her thighs with his fingers.

"Am I hurting you?" He was concerned. Even though he had made it a habit not to get involved with any of his partners, she had made him pause. There was something special about this girl; there was something about her that had stayed in his mind ever since their first meeting.

"No...oh, Adam, that feels so good." Davie kissed him back as she felt her response spiraling toward the unknown. "Adam...Adam..." Her breath caught.

"What Sweetheart?" It was easy to see how excited she had become and it felt good to know that he had that effect on her.

"Adam..." She felt very timid. "I've never felt like this before."

"I'm glad." He thought of how good it was going to feel when he entered her. "I'm so very glad."

"Adam...teach me..."

He mated their lips and wrestled his tongue with hers. "What do you want me to teach you?" He smiled against her neck.

"Teach me how to...ooh..." She arched her back and pressed herself into his palm. "How to make it good for you."

Oh lord, so sweet, he thought as he took a delicate nub into his mouth. "How could it not be good for me? You are so beautiful..."

Davie felt another shudder run through her. "But, I don't know...Adam, I," She inhaled sharply as she felt his fingers probing inside her. "Adam...I've never..."

For the first time, Adam remained motionless. "Never...what?"

"I've...never been with a man before." She sensed his withdrawal before he actually pulled away.

Adam's brow was furrowed, "What are you saying, Davie?"

The icy chill that Davie felt left her feeling embarrassed to be lying naked in bed with this man. She pulled the bedsheet over her exposed breasts. "I've never been with a man...before"

He sat upright in bed seemingly unaware that he was just as naked as she was. "Are you telling me that you're a virgin?"

Davie sat up clutching the bed linens tightly to her body. "Yes."

"Damnation!" Adam got up from the bed angrily. "You couldn't have told me that before?"

Her eyes welled with tears. "I didn't know we were going to wind up in your bed..."

They had gone out to dinner, again, and a walk in the park. His kisses turned into an invitation back to his apartment. She wasn't naïve, she knew that they might...get closer, but she was so spellbound by him...

"Dammit Davie! I have never taken a virgin before and I certainly don't intend to start with you!"

She watched incredulously as he pulled a pair of jeans on. "I'm sorry...I..." Suddenly Davie felt angry. "If you thought that I thought it was going to be some kind of commitment, you don't need to worry. I got carried away...don't worry, it won't happen again." She stood taking the bedsheet with her to cover herself. "If you don't mind giving me some privacy, I'll get dressed."

Her anger made him feel contrite and he responded in much gentler tones. "I'll take you home as soon as you're ready."

"Don't bother! I'll manage on my own." She stared at the bedroom door pointedly, but he didn't budge. "Fine!" Davie dropped the linen to the floor and picked up her clothing.

Earlier, Adam's body had felt as cold as if he had been blasted with icy water, but as he got another glimpse of her astonishingly beautiful naked body again, he was happy he had donned his pants to hide his reaction.

"I...I'm sorry", he turned his back to her. "I...I just can't be...the first..."

"What?!"

"I'm sorry..." He left the room.

# CHAPTER 1

Davie had hoped to be working in earnest at her desk before anybody else got in to the office after the long holiday weekend, but one delay after another had her walking into the building amidst a throng of co-workers. The office building was a modern hull of steel and glass and loomed over the sleepy bedroom community. A myriad grouping of companies had made their move to this towering infrastructure over the last few years. It was a prestigious place for a business to call home. Davie took the elevator to the fourth floor. She had nearly made it to her offices when she heard him behind her.

"Good morning, Miss Prescott...Davie." His voice still sounded like it had some of the other night's regret in it.

Davie cursed silently when she felt her pulse take a giant leap. Since they weren't alone in the hallway, she couldn't very well ignore him without raising the eyebrows of her co-workers. She turned as casually as she could manage. "Good morning." She opened her office door, closed it soundly behind her and escaped to her desk.

Her hands were trembling. Davie hoped to calm herself before anyone noticed her agitated state. Damn the man for doing that to her! Although she had been nervous about seeing him again, she really hadn't thought he would have so great an effect on her. It was just the humiliation, she was sure of that. All weekend she was angry at the thought of how he must have been laughing at her. He must have enjoyed knowing he had her succumbing to his seduction, willingly ready to give herself to him...for the very first time of her life! It was astounding that the



creep hadn't taken full advantage and gone for the trophy. She just couldn't reconcile his insulting behavior with the remorseful apology he had tried to give her during the ride home Friday night.

She took a deep breath and tried a few mental relaxation exercises. Closing her eyes, she tried to picture herself in a comfortable spot, someplace where she felt warm, someplace where...she quickly scratched the image that popped into her mind, the memory of lying in Adam Sherman's arms in his bed. Okay, she decided to try again. Davie tried to get an image of the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in this world...there was the spot in the hollow of his throat. Nope, scratch that. She was completely frustrated and not just because he had brought her so exquisitely to a level she had never known before, and then just left her hanging, but because she was still so infatuated with him. She was supposed to be totally furious with him!

The phone rang and startled her. Her two fellow office workers hadn't gotten to their desks yet and Davie was alone in the office. She reached for the ringing phone only when the flashing button showed it was from an outside line. Davie loved her job and enjoyed dealing with customers; even when a customer started their conversation with a complaint, she usually found a way to smooth things over. She was good with people. Davie liked to talk, she liked to draw people into conversations. She found it hard to understand how some people could sit all day without a large amount of human contact, people like Adam Sherman who spent his days pouring over schematics and computer terminals; she wondered if there was something wrong with the social skills of such an isolated worker. The caller had a few questions about the service contract with the Internet Provider she represented. She answered all his questions to his satisfaction.

At the beginning of the last school term Davie had found out about this job when she was surfing the Net in her college library. It wound up being an ideal position. The bosses often gave consideration to students who needed flexible hours to fit their course schedules. She was able to work four mornings and all day Friday and still be able to attend classes in

the afternoons and evenings in Business Administration at the nearby university.

Everything had seemed so perfect, she looked forward to coming to her job each day and enjoyed the people she worked with. When she first met Adam and he asked her out, she had to put aside her wariness about dating a co-worker. Adam Sherman was the System's Manager for the Internet Provider company where they both worked; luckily he spent his days in a different department than her. He had started with Home-Based Communications when he graduated college as an Information System Specialist and had moved himself up in just a few short years to manage the department. He was very good at what he did. The other employees had joked that Adam was a closet "hacker"; supposedly there wasn't a computer system that he couldn't master. Everyone respected Adam Sherman and Davida Prescott had been very flattered when he walked into her office and asked her to lunch that first week.

Davie was aware that she was an object of envy by several of the female staff, Adam was also extraordinarily good looking and had earned himself a reputation for being quite a desirable escort. It was well known that Adam had an impressive list of female companions, including several of the single women from HBC. He never minded going out on the town with a different lady friend every weekend and it was no secret that many young ladies were familiar with the inside of his bedroom. Davie's cheeks flamed as she remembered that she had willingly offered herself as just one more of his conquests...and he had turned her down!

A few of her college girlfriends had seen Davie with Adam when he drove her to her classes one day, she had been running late and missed the bus so he did her a favor. They noticed how very good-looking he was; Davie had already noticed his broad shoulders, his expressive hazel eyes and his sensual hands. He drove her to classes a few more times, stopping for lunch along the way. Then he asked her out to dinner and a movie...and then dinner...and again. He never hid his attraction to her. Although she had received many offers Davie had never seriously thought of going to bed with a man before, but something about Adam monopolized her thoughts until she had dreams of making love with him.

Each time she looked at his hands, she had no difficulty imagining those long fingers manipulating fine computer circuitry...or splayed over her naked body teasing it to an awareness she'd never known before.

She thought she was going to live those dreams Friday night, but then she learned in a cruel way that a virgin apparently wasn't worth his time. He obviously wanted someone who knew all the tricks, someone he didn't have to concern himself with pleasing. She just couldn't believe how shallow he really was.



Adam had never before had difficulty concentrating on his work. The company had just finished investing a lot of time and money into a new Integrated Services Digital Network and it was his responsibility to make sure everything worked. Great, he thought to himself, one screw-up and all of their customers could kiss their email and web-sites goodbye.

He thought of how one very pretty young lady in Customer Service would respond to customer complaints..."Oh, I'm sorry, is this your FIRST Internet connection? Well, our department manager has a problem with that..."

Damn! She's twenty years old...and beautiful. He never once thought she was so inexperienced, he just couldn't believe that someone that appealing hadn't already been sweet-talked all the way by a guy or two. In this day and age, he thought cynically, he would never have expected some college girl to be saving herself. The problem was he still wanted her and that scared the hell out of him! There had never been another woman that had monopolized his thoughts the way Davie did. He certainly wasn't desperate, if he just wanted to spend an evening out or have sex he had any number of willing partners. But when he thought of Davie, he wanted more than sex, he wanted her body and soul. He wanted a relationship, not just a one or two night fling. It flabbergasted him that the beautiful Davie Prescott had wanted him enough to give up her virginity. It

frustrated him that he could never let her know why he couldn't do that to her.

There had been several times when he had started to call her over the weekend, but then he remembered how quiet she had been when he drove her home and tried to apologize. She had actually started to walk home, he followed her with his car for about half a mile before she finally gave in and got in. Adam felt terrible; he knew how badly he had hurt her with his rejection. If only he could make her understand how much he still wanted her, but he didn't know how. If only he could make himself understand why he wanted her so much...

Adam had never felt so frustrated about a relationship before, at least not since he got out of that little Pennsylvania town he grew up in. His teen-age years were filled with memories he wished he didn't have; so long as he could remember that time, though, he'd never be any good for someone as pure as Davie. He had been with a lot of women and he never made any secret of his appetite or his lack of emotional commitment. Adam had told himself that his unusual interest in Davie as a person and not just a sex partner was only a sign of his "growing up", at twenty-five it was bound to happen...eventually. He shook his head, because it was Davie and not his age that was playing havoc with his libido.

Adam stared at the clock on the wall and decided that he had to get close to Davie somehow. He had no idea how to get beyond his dilemma, but he knew he had to try to mend fences with her. Red roses were Davie's favorite, he had learned that during one of their relaxing conversations. He had enjoyed listening to her talk about just about any subject, he was always interested in everything that made her smile, or pause. A quick phone call to the florist gave him a touch of hope.

Forty-five minutes later he felt a little cocky as he walked down the hall to Customer Service.

The door was ajar and Adam peeked in. Only one of the desks was occupied.

"Oh, hi Mr. Sherman. Are you looking for Davie?" Agnes, one of the other girls in Customer Service, was holding down the fort by herself.

Since he had not made any secret of his interest in Davie, it was a natural assumption why he was there. "She's already gone for the day."

Checking his watch, he frowned. "Isn't it a little bit early?"

"To be honest, I don't think she was feeling too well." Agnes shrugged. "And then she got some flowers delivered and it must've really started her allergies or something...'cause her eyes got all red and she had to get out of here."

"Flowers were delivered?" Good, then she got his note.

"Yeah. They were really pretty. She took them with her."

"She did?" Maybe there was a reason to feel optimistic after all. Adam thanked Agnes and left the office.

It was only when he passed the garbage chute that he lost his newfound hope. On the floor was a rose; a piece of green fern was sticking out from the side of the bin where it had gotten stuck when the bouquet was thrown out.



Davie was surprised when the doorbell rang so early; she hadn't expected Chad until eight o'clock. Luckily, she was already dressed and ready to go, so they could get a few minutes jump on traffic if he wanted.

"This is a..." She pulled the door open to see Adam standing there.

"A surprise?" He tried to smile, but seeing her cold gaze greeting him was unnerving.

"I'm really busy." She had put up with the occasional glimpses of him for the last few weeks at work and had managed to fool herself into thinking she wasn't affected by him. It was different seeing him at her apartment door.

"Can I come in?" He waited for an answer. "I promise I won't be long."

Adam noted the outfit she wore. It didn't look like she had planned to be lounging at home all evening, at least not alone.

"I'm getting ready to go out. I have a friend coming over." She started to push the door closed.

He put his hand against the door to prop it open. "I promise you I won't keep you long."

She looked at the watch on her wrist and shrugged. "Keep it short."

He followed her inside. "Please Davie, take pity on me, I feel like a jerk already."

"There's nothing I can do about that." Placing her hands on her hips, Davie tried to ignore the trembling she felt inside, the same trembling she got whenever she saw him lately. "Did you have something important to say?"

"I want to see you."

"Why?"

He shrugged.

"I'm still a virgin, Adam. So you're not interested. Nothing has changed." She walked back to the door and put her hand on the knob to open it.

"I like you, Davie." He hadn't been able to get her out of his mind. He had tried, but he hadn't even been able to bring himself to see anyone else since before the fiasco when they almost made love. That was a new experience for Adam Sherman, spending his nights alone, sitting in a movie house alone...dreaming of Davie and waking to take a cold shower...alone.

She turned to face him. "So why did you make me feel like...a nothing, like a piece of dirt?" It surprised her that she still felt so strongly. "You humiliated me that night. But you know, I thought about it, I have absolutely no reason to feel ashamed in front of someone like you." Davie thought again about his shallowness.

There was sadness in his eyes as he listened to her tirade. She was right, he thought, he was the last person in the world to make anyone else feel ashamed. "There's nothing you can call me that I haven't already labeled myself at one time or other in my life. I'm sorry I hurt you. That never was my intention."

The quiet apology almost got to her; she had to remind herself to stay angry. "It's time for you to leave."

"Isn't there anything I can do to make it up to you? Davie, isn't there anyway I could see you?" He even surprised himself with his willingness to beg.

Davie forced a laugh. "I'm not going to go out and get laid just so you can feel comfortable. And I have no intention of giving you reason to be comfortable with me again."

"I'm sorry." He was clearly embarrassed. "I know I have a problem. I know I have to deal with it. But I can't get you off my mind."

"Try. Because I'm not interested in your problems or your over-inflated ego."

There was a knock at the door.

She exhaled a breath and smoothed her blouse before she pulled the door open.

"Hi." Chad was tall and blond and broad-shouldered. His smile turned to puzzlement when he saw Adam behind Davie.

"Hi." Her greeting was just a little too merry. Davie stood on her toes and kissed Chad on the mouth. She did her best to pretend that she forgot about Adam standing in the room behind her.

Adam cleared his throat. Chad looked at Davie questioningly.

"Oh, sorry, Mr. Sherman was just leaving." She wrinkled her nose delicately at Chad before turning to Adam. "Mr. Sherman, this is my date, Chad Donaldson." She turned back to Chad. "Mr. Sherman heads up one of the departments at work. He was trying to convince me to do some extra paperwork. I told him I prefer not to work off hours."

Sensing some tension, Chad wasn't too sure of what to say. He extended his hand to Adam. "Good to meet you, Mr. Sherman."

"Yeah." Adam shook the extended hand but stared at Davie the entire time. "Are you sure I can't convince you... to come to the office, Miss Prescott?" He had great plans on his way over there. His plans went down the tubes with the jock standing in her doorway,

"Nope, sorry," She linked her arm through Chad's. "I have every intention of having fun this weekend, Mr. Sherman."

Adam bottled up the stab of jealousy he felt at seeing Davie link her arm with her date. Jealousy was a shock to his system. "I'm sorry to have bothered you." He tried to smile at Chad. "I hope you enjoy yourselves." Just not too much, he thought.

When the door closed behind Adam, he could swear he heard Davie laughing.





# FINAL SIN



**CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS**

**CHELLE CORDERO**

# FINAL SIN

by

Chelle Cordero

Vanilla Heart Publishing  
USA

# Final Sin

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## PROLOGUE

There wasn't anyone there who didn't look like they weren't ready to heave. Julie felt sorry for the vollies, the members of the local volunteer ambulance corps. At least she and Matt were being paid to be there. Then again, no amount of money was worth witnessing the carnage that was lying there before them.

Matt had done the unwelcome task and already pronounced one of the girls dead. It was obvious death, obvious to anyone. Trying her best not to step into the pool of blood or disturb anything else vital to the crime scene investigation that would follow, she finished preparing the one girl who was still alive for transport.

A young man in his late twenties or early thirties, Julie wasn't sure without reading the patient care report, had been burnt when his shirt had caught fire. He was sitting huddled and guarding his severely burnt arm as Matt treated him. He looked scared and in shock at the events around him and wouldn't look at any of the police officers who had responded. Julie assumed that it was his need to deny the trauma.

A broad shouldered officer came through the door and took command of the scene. He seemed hardened to the butchery, almost as if he had seen too many gruesome scenes just like this one. Dressed in a dark blue baseball jacket, open collar knit shirt and khaki pants, he donned a pair of latex gloves he had carried in his pocket and began an almost detached visual inspection of the room. The springy snap of the elastic gloves stretching to fit his large hands was in sharp contrast to his motionless stance. Other officers at the scene deferred to his judgment and took instructions from him as he calmly took in the entire scene. He was concerned with the best way to collect the pertinent evidence to tell the story of what had happened.

As Julie and one of the ambulance crewmembers moved the surviving girl to the gurney, she risked a quick look at the tall officer's dark eyes and noted that there was a thinly disguised veil of dismay. He had intrigued her with his stony expression and seeming aloofness to the horrors, and his complete focus on the collection of relevant clues. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, it was a comfort to Julie that the cop was not completely indifferent to this horror or detached from the human cost.

For Matt and Julie, their tour of duty had started out like many others. There had been a call to a minor motor vehicle accident, another for chest pains and one more for a cancer patient who needed to go to the hospital for treatment. Many of the upstate New York communities had contracted with Paramedic services to complement the existing ambulance corps and provide emergency medical response. Whether paid or unpaid, the certified corps always responded with Emergency Medical Technicians who were capable of handling most emergencies. When the Paramedics were dispatched as well, IV drugs and additional hands could often help make critical differences when necessary.

This call had gone out over the radio for a burn victim, so none of the responding police, fire fighters, volunteer ambulance crew nor paramedics were prepared for what they found when they reached this isolated tool shed. From the outside, the grayed wood had seemed serene enough, and the one small window had been caked over with dirt. She didn't think that she would have given the shed a second glance under normal circumstances. But this was far from normal. No one had anticipated the horror scene inside.

Two young women were staked to the dirt floor, both had bled profusely from a variety of wounds. Although one was still alive, barely breathing after severe mutilation and a huge loss of blood, the other had been burned and was only the charred remains of who she once was. Julie wasn't alone in her prayers that the young woman had died long before the flames had destroyed her body. It didn't look like she had struggled and yet her mouth was open, Julie feared that she might have died screaming. She had still been smoldering when the fire department had arrived and the puddle of water around her had quickly turned into mud.

The young man told them tearfully that he had tried to douse the flames and had been injured when his own shirtsleeves caught fire. If he hadn't run from the remote little building into the night, none of them might even have been discovered until they had all perished. A passing motorist with a cell phone caught sight of the man running with his clothes on fire and dialed nine-one-one before he got out to help. Apparently a second man, the monster responsible for the imprisonment and torture of these three young people, had already disappeared into the murky darkness.

The police were questioning the male victim while Matt finished cutting away his charred shirtsleeve. He said his name was Andrew and that he and the other man had picked the two girls up in a bar in Westchester. With the two girls in the back seat, Andrew drove into the northern Hudson Valley town following the step-by-step directions of the second man. Andrew said he didn't know the other man's name, he had used more than one and Andrew didn't think any of them were real. They snorted some coke, he assumed it was supplied by the unknown assailant, and had sex. That was when the other man had pulled a gun and forced Andrew to tie the two



girls to stakes he pounded into the ground. Then Andrew was led outside and locked in the trunk of the car.

He heard muffled screams, he couldn't tell where they were coming from. He was disoriented and felt like he was suffocating in the trunk of that car, but he said it sounded like the screaming went on for hours. He was finally released and led back into the smokehouse by gunpoint to see the horrible results. It was when the perpetrator doused the first girl with gasoline and lit a match that Andrew finally tried to fight. The man ward off the attack and pushed Andrew to the ground. Then he ran. Andrew stayed behind to try to extinguish the flames and save the poor girl.

Julie used her walkie-talkie to call dispatch and request a chopper to bring her patient to the trauma center. The voice on the radio squawked back that there was a multi-car and multi-patient accident on the local highway, the chopper was already enroute to that scene and wasn't available for their call, nor was there a second rig available to transport the patients separately. Matt, listening on his own talkie, motioned that they could transport the victims together since his patient, although burned, was stable.

They moved their patients to the ambulance with the surviving girl lying motionless on the gurney. Julie started a line to get some much-needed fluids into her patient. She kept her hands steady as she inserted the first of two large bore IV's into the young girl's arm and attached the saline drip. Matt was stepping into the truck as she was carefully inserting a tube down the throat to intubate the girl.

The broad shouldered officer followed Matt to the open rear doors of the rig as he transferred Andrew to the bench in the box rig. Matt made sure that his patient was seat belted in place, his arm had been wrapped in wet gauze. The cop watched quietly as Julie adjusted the rate of drips coming out of the hanging saline bag that fed into the young girl's arm. A bottle of sterile water was placed nearby to keep the burn patient's dressing wet enroute to the hospital.

Obviously there were questions to be asked, but the paramedics and EMT's had important work to do and the officer discreetly tried to stay out of their way. Finally, as the cop saw Julie turn to jot something onto her clipboard, he stepped into the rig. Matt threw an annoyed territorial look in the direction of the officer at his invasion. The cop had to stoop to accommodate his large six-foot-plus frame. Stepping closer to Julie, he quietly asked her to stop in at the local police station upon her return to help fill in some patient information that he needed for his reports. Even though he worded the suggestion politely like a request, it wasn't really a question. He let her know he would be expecting her later.

Piercing tones squelched over the walkie talkies on the paramedics' belts and the ambulance radio. Matt left to answer the other call for help and left Julie and the two EMT's in the back of the rig with the patients. He was needed elsewhere. Matt

brushed past the man just as the officer backed out of the way and stepped down from the step at the big double doors. Julie reached for the grab bar on one of the doors and the policeman helped by swinging the doors closed. He mouthed the word "later" through the glass panes. The ambulance driver waited for Julie's word before he shifted the truck into gear.

The girl, Andrew had called her Holly, didn't survive the thirty-five-minute trip to the hospital. Her heart stopped. One of the EMT's started CPR while the second hooked up the leads from the monitor. They shared a hopeful moment as they watched the screen show a normal sinus rhythm only to lose their optimism when CPR was briefly stopped to obtain a true reading. At the same time the EMT took pride in the competent CPR, he was disheartened that the young girl's heart could not maintain the rhythm on its own.

Julie injected epinephrine and sodium bicarb twice in an effort to restart her heart, but they couldn't get her back. She had lost too much blood and had suffered too many traumas. It was almost as if she was surrendering to the peaceful cloak of death. It was a frustrating twenty-five minutes while the crew worked hard to save the young woman's life.

Andrew sat quietly on the bench as the ambulance crew worked non-stop, his eyes were brimming with unshed tears.

Julie looked over her shoulder at him and felt sorry for the young man. He was so obviously in pain with his own injuries, but he sat quietly and tried to stay out of the way while they tried in vain to revive Holly. The code was called at the hospital, the doctors hadn't even bothered to transfer the poor girl from the gurney before they pronounced her.

## Chapter One

On the way back from the hospital, Julie got banged out on another job. Tones had come across the airwaves to respond to a seven-year old female with an uncontrollable nosebleed. It was just a simple nosebleed caused by a persistent but common cold and aggravated by an overly worried mother. It would have been a waste of resources for Julie to ride this call in. The Emergency Medical Technicians on the rig were well equipped to handle this kind of emergency.

Julie never underestimated the value of the vollies that rode the local rigs. Even though they were unpaid, she had always been lucky to ride with some of the most professional people in the field. They were well trained and they took their commitments seriously. She had ridden as an Emergency Medical Technician for two years with a paid service before she made the decision to begin her Paramedic classes. Julie would never let herself forget who she was or where she came from and she resented those medics who treated the EMT's and other vollies poorly. Many of the ambulance corps members that rode with Julie appreciated the mutual respect between them. Often she had heard that she was specifically requested to cover some of the stations.

She handed patient care over to the BLS crew and continued on her way to the police station. Before she got there, Julie took the Motorola walkie-talkie from her belt and called to Matt for his location. He was on his way to one of the area hospitals aggressively treating a difficulty breathing case in the back of his rig. It would be a while before he finished up the required paperwork at the hospital. Anytime a paramedic had to use IV drugs the paperwork was lengthy and every detail had to be perfect. She told him over the radio that she'd catch up with him later.

The officer met her as soon as she entered the lobby of the police station, he had watched as she pulled up in the van-style medic fly-car on the closed circuit TV. Julie thought that the little lobby seemed even smaller with him in it; she hadn't remembered quite how broad his shoulders were and marveled that he had even been able to fit in the back of the ambulance. She noticed he also had the height to wear those broad shoulders very well. He was wearing a dark blue knit shirt and

khaki pants that emphasized his tall, lean build. He was certainly an attractive man, she thought.

"Hi, I didn't get to introduce myself before, I'm Deputy Sheriff Jacob Carlson. Please call me Jake." He extended his hand to her in greeting. His hand fully enveloped hers in warmth and his touch sent a tingly pulse racing up her arm.

"Julie Jennings." She returned his greeting with a slight nod of her head and her own extended hand. His lingering grip was firm and comfortably solid. Julie was struck by the feeling of comfort she had feeling her hand embraced by his. He held her hand just a moment longer than he had meant to.

"Why don't we go sit inside?" He reminded himself to let go of her hand and motioned for her to walk down the narrow hallway. She couldn't help but notice again, as she followed him down the corridor, how big a man he was. He looked powerful and muscular, the way he moved was fluid and strong. He moved with a confidence and, despite his large size, a grace few men seemed to radiate. This man was formidable, Julie thought, and was somehow comforted with the thought that he was upholding the law to make her world a little safer.

Stopping by a doorway, he let Julie pass him. "Let me just get the light," he reached past her to flip the light switch on in the stark interview room. A bare bulb glared from the ceiling fixture. "Can I get you a cup of coffee or something?"

"No thanks." Julie entered the small room and sat in one of the green padded chairs at the wooden table.

Julie had been at this police station before to check on the welfare of prisoners. She recognized this chamber as one of the interview rooms. Bare except for a small wooden table in ash blonde wood and three metal chairs with green padding, it normally gave her a chill. Somehow though the man who entered the room behind her seemed to warm up the temperature a few notches.

He stood next to her and apologetically picked up what had appeared to be a square plastic sheet from the table. "I need to ask you to let me get your shoeprints since you were at the scene. I'm going to have to call your partner for this, too." He waited for her to acknowledge his request before he crouched in front of her. "Unfortunately there was so much traffic in the cabin, we wanted to be able to isolate any shoeprints that might help us find the perp."

"No problem." Julie stood and stepped on the vinyl sheet he had put down on the floor for her to step on. She noticed he had put on a pair of latex gloves. "Is that it?"

He knelt in front of her and tried very hard not to focus on the delicate curve of her hips. "Yeah." When she stepped back, he carefully picked the sheet up by the corners and covered it with another clear plastic sheet before sliding it into a large manila envelope. He sealed the envelope, picked up a pen to write her name on it and placed it into a wire basket on the table. Julie sat back in the chair.

Jake settled in a chair on the other side of the table and pulled the tight gloves off of his hands. He flexed his fingers to get the circulation going again. Smiling, he looked at her, "I hate those things."

She nodded in complete commiseration.

"I've got the names and patient info here." She pulled a folded paper from the pocket of her uniform shirt. "The girl didn't make it." His knit polo shirt was open at the collar just enough to reveal a generous dusting of dark curls. Julie noticed his corded neck muscles tense as she told him of the poor girl's tragic fate.

Jake exhaled loudly and muttered an expletive. "Did the guy...", he looked down at the paperwork in front of him, "Andrew Larkin tell you anything?"

She shrugged. "Basically just what he told you and the other cops at the scene." Julie took a moment to replay any conversation that had taken place during the trip to the hospital, being careful not to reveal any confidential patient information. She wanted to help as much as she could. "He did say that he had been the one to, well, he had been with Holly. The other guy, he called him John, at least that was one of the names he had used, had been with Beth. He didn't know the girls' last names."

Jake sat at the opposite side of the table and made a few notes on a yellow pad of paper that was lying there. "It was a real mess." He tipped his chair back, crossed his muscled arms and studied her.

She looked young. She was of average height and slender, although when he thought about it, nothing about her really was very average. It wasn't easy to ignore that she definitely had all the right curves. Even with the starched white uniform shirt and shiny EMS badge, the unisex trousers and bulging pockets, she was definitely all-woman, he thought quietly. He silently tried to guess how tall she was, five-five or five-six? She certainly didn't weigh much. Appreciating her figure as only a man could, he admitted to himself that he wouldn't mind picking her up and trying to guess her weight.

Jake silently admonished himself. They were both professionals and he had to curb his male appreciation of her looks before he crossed any boundaries. His imagination had gone into overdrive though, and he found it hard to try not to imagine her out of her uniform. He found it even harder not imagining that he was helping her out of her uniform. When he watched her working so feverishly to try to save that poor girl's life, he couldn't help but think that she was just a kid herself. It was a shock to his normally reserved nature to realize, kid or not, she also was a very attractive woman. Jake thought about the crime scene and admonished himself, of all places to try to make a pick-up.

He continued to study her. "How do you stand it?" Jake was amazed that she seemed so untouched by the brutality they had witnessed. He resisted his natural inclination to offer comfort in his arms. She was so pretty he thought. Her eyes were

so full of life and he thought of how many lives she must have seen die in her line of work. It must be nice to view life through the passionate eyes of her youth.

"I try not to think about it." She began to wonder if he was nearly as hardened as she originally thought. "You know that they scheduled a CISD session in a couple of days, don't you?" His composed expression gave nothing away. "Are you going to be there?" Her supervisor mandated all of the paramedics to attend critical incident stress debriefing sessions whenever one of their calls was deemed especially unnerving. Julie always went and participated fully; it did help her deal with brutal or tragic cases. The first time she had ever gone was after an entire family was wiped out in a fiery car accident, including kids. It had helped.

"No. They told us about it, but I've seen a lot worse. Besides, I'd rather not lose any time when I could be looking for evidence. I want to find the guy who did this. That's my way of coping." He shrugged his broad shoulders as he looked directly into her eyes. His voice had taken on a steely edge.

"My partner, Matt, never thinks he needs them either." She gently tried to coax him. "But they do help."

He shook his head and looked down as he scribbled something on the pad in front of him. "Nah, if I needed it, I'd go. I'm really not trying to be any macho man." He kept looking at the pad of paper. Julie was sure that if he had looked up, she would have seen the telltale dismay in his eyes that she had glimpsed earlier.

They were both silent for a few moments. "Well, is there anything else I can help you with?" Julie pushed her chair back and started to stand.

Jake quickly stood and came to his full height. He stammered for something to say to keep her there longer. He didn't want her to leave yet. She fascinated him. He didn't know why, but he needed to reach out to her. His eyes had lingered on her even at that bloody scene earlier. "How long have you been a paramedic?" He wondered how long the auburn hair she had braided into a bun was. The bun, he realized, was probably her choice of style not only for its utilitarian purposes but also because it might make her look older. Jake had to fight the urge to loosen the bun. The youthfulness she tried to disguise pulled at him in a primitive way.

"Two years."

"So, that makes you... twenty-two?... twenty-three?" He looked at her full lips and surprised himself by wondering how they would taste. Oh man get a grip, he chastised himself silently. He tried telling himself once again that she was just a kid, she was much too young for the things he was thinking.

"I'm twenty-four." She was thrown off balance by his personal questions.

He glanced at her left hand and was happy to see that there wasn't any ring. "I'm thirty-seven", thirteen years older than you, he thought to himself. I must be overtired because I'm finding it too easy to be distracted by her. Thirteen years, it

isn't such a big deal, is it he wondered? Jake tried to think of something else to say, something that wouldn't sound too inane.

Julie realized that she really didn't mind spending time with him. He intrigued her enough to want to know more about him. But she still checked her watch discreetly; she couldn't stay there very long. "How long have you been a cop?"

"Fourteen years"

"Here?" She was surprised. She didn't recognize him and she thought she had met most of the town cops at the various jobs she had responded to. Julie definitely would have remembered him, especially his very broad shoulders. They looked like strong shoulders. She chuckled quietly, she always did have a weakness for big men. His wavy chestnut brown hair barely brushed the back of his shirt collar and tempted her to touch it.

"No, I'm with the Sheriff's department in B.C.I." At her puzzled expression, he explained, "Bureau of Criminal Investigations. We go mostly to crime scenes, homicides, arsons, things like that."

She chuckled out loud suddenly and he paused. "And you wondered how I handle it?"

Jake knew that she'd be insulted if he let her know he thought she looked too pretty to be caught up in such ugliness. He had been at enough accident and crime scenes to have a pretty good idea of the things Julie saw when she responded to an ambulance call and he marveled at her composure. At a loss of what to say, he merely shrugged and Julie could see the fabric of his knit shirt straining as the muscles in his upper arms flexed. She tried not to stare.

"In case I need any more information, can I have your phone number?" He pulled out a notepad from his shirt pocket and waited with his pen poised.

She stood. "You can always reach me through Town Hall. We're in and out of the medic station so often, at least there you can leave a message and I'll get back to you."

"Well," he took a step around the desk, "Can I have your phone number anyway?" He knew very well that he could reach her through the town. He also knew very well that he wanted her number for himself. The hell with propriety, he thought, the hell with age. He was a man and she was definitely a woman.

Julie looked into his dark brown eyes and was surprised to see a definite softening in them. He had a few fine creases at the corners of his eyes and Julie enviously noted how full his lashes were. Jake waited and smiled. He looked almost hopeful.

She didn't let him down.

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He wondered why it had taken him so long to realize that she was the one. Usually he was able to tell with just a glance, but then he had been wrong before and

had chosen women that had disappointed him terribly. It was so hard to suffer when they let him down.

It was only after he had thought about her while he watched another ambulance crew bring their patient in that he realized how gently she had tended to her patients, how light her touch had seemed, that he knew for sure. He knew that she had been sent to him for one purpose.

She really cared.

She was the one.

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He entered the autopsy suite passing the heavy wooden sign next to the door. It said, "HIC LOCUS EST UBI MORS GAUDET SUCCURRERE VITAE". Once before when Jake had been here, he had asked for a translation of the Latin words and was told, "This is the place where death rejoices to teach those who live." He was anxious to learn and he hoped Holly would be anxious to teach. He had high hopes that they could learn something, anything that would lead them to the murderer. Two men were waiting for him as he donned a surgical gown and protective eyewear.

Holly's body was already lying on the shiny, aluminum dissection table. The table, a little more than waist high, was edged with an aluminum channel to allow blood and fluids to drain away from the body. The room was uncluttered and glaringly bright. It was a stark reminder of the lifelessness of the cadavers stored in the drawers along the wall. Soft music played from a radio on the counter in contrast to the harsh reality of the body lying motionless on the sterile looking table. Jake was always impressed with the clean up after an autopsy, the table always looked totally fresh and unused in time for the next patient. And there was always a next patient to fill the spot. That supply never seemed to end.

Dr. Ramos, the pathologist in charge of the lab, explained that one of his residents had already taken care of Beth, the charred corpse, early in the morning. He would complete his report and get it to Jake as promptly as possible. The first-year-resident assigned to assist Ramos with this autopsy was looking ever so proper in his starched white lab coat and was nervously readying a number of quart-sized jars for organ tissue samples to be sent to the lab for toxicology tests.

The doctor donned clean gloves before adjusting his goggles. "Pretty messy scene last night, huh?" Ramos spoke with ease, almost as if he was chatting with a familiar friend over a card game. Well into his sixties, the study of body parts and what they could tell you about how a person lived and died had always fascinated the doctor. He was well accomplished in his field and his word was highly respected in all the circles of investigation and trial. The doctor lived by the words on the door and truly believed that the dead rejoiced in communicating with him.

Although it was Ramos' responsibility as Medical Examiner to pen all final autopsy reports, in recent years he had often allowed younger pathologists and first



and second year residents to perform the more mundane procedures. He was personally overseeing this autopsy on Holly as a favor to Jake and to help speed along the findings and bring closure to his investigation. Dr. Ramos had the utmost respect for Jake Carlson, he had always been a man of his word who always sought the truth and justice for the victims. Ramos also got a special kick out of Jake's interest in the autopsies and his own regard for listening to what the dead had to say.

It was a shame, mused Ramos that Jake hadn't chosen medicine as his career, but then again, he was very good at what he did. If he weren't so good, he never would have made it to the rank of Commander, especially as early as he did. Carlson had certainly been a few years younger than his two most recent predecessors had been when they earned their titles. In the good doctor's opinion, if that old goat sitting in the Chief's chair ever decided to retire, Jacob Carlson would probably find himself heading up his department.

Jake sighed. "Yeah. Unfortunately, with all the people who responded, all the trampling through the place, I can't shake the gut feeling that we missed something."

A crime scene should remain undisturbed, victim's bodies should remain where they're found, there shouldn't be any bloody footprints belonging to rescuers. While so many of the EMS and fire personnel were careful not to disturb any more of the scene than they needed to, it had been impossible to maintain the complete integrity of the scene. Too many shoeprints to get anything clean, too many clothing fibers left by responding police and rescue workers, and the fire department destroyed evidence as it put out the fire.

It made Jake feel more than a little guilty and certainly sinister that he would have preferred no survivors that had to be removed from the cabin. Of course he wanted survivors, he corrected his thoughts silently, he just wished they had all been outside of the cabin when they were found. "Now we'll have to waste time getting shoeprints and all from everyone who was there."

"I've already begun my external examination. We've recorded the height and weight, her clothing and the general appearance." The girl had been dressed in a torn, gauzy white shroud similar in shape to a judge's robe, or graduation gown, and it had emphasized her youth.

The gray-haired doctor motioned that he was once again turning on the tape recorder to dictate his findings. "We have multiple lacerations and avulsions of both breasts, while there was profuse bleeding, no arteries or veins were compromised. This appears to be a non-fatal injury. There are also severe contusions and rope burns circling both wrists and ankles, these appear to be consistent with a struggle. There was no evidence of tissue samples under the victim's nails. Some light bruising around the mouth and laterally on both cheeks are in conformity with the type of gag the police report described."

"The pattern of the lacerations and the tearing of the breasts seem to have been done with a common variety garden tool. We are comparing the markings to some of the hand tools found at the scene." The abandoned tool shed was located at the perimeter of an old farm that had been sold to a developer for new housing. Like most of the suburbs, active farms and open land was giving way to an increased population.

Dr. Ramos removed the thin white sheet that had covered the young girl's body. "I noted the absence of any body hair on the trunk, including the pubic area. She seems to have been freshly shaved. There also appears to have been vaginal bleeding." He gently inserted a speculum into the cadaver's vagina and adjusted the light behind him. Jake was impressed with the respect Dr. Ramos showed in his handling of the young victim's remains.

"There appears to be several lacerations and contusions along the inner membranes. My impression is that a hard object penetrated the victim, possibly something jagged. I am going to swab the vaginal canal for any evidence of fluids." If any semen was present, then the DNA would be run through the computers.

Remembering that Julie had told him about Andrew Larkin telling her he had sex with Holly, Jake made a mental note to have Larkin called in for a DNA sample for comparison. He watched as several swabs were bagged and labeled for the lab. He spotted a small amount of a white chalky substance on the side of Holly's knee. "Doc, what's this?" Jake pointed making sure not to touch and contaminate the body.

"I don't know." Ramos walked around the table to Jake's side. "Only one way to find out." The doctor scraped the white substance with a cotton swab and dropped it into another plastic specimen bag to send to the lab.

Dr. Ramos finished his examination of the outer body. Then he picked up a shiny knife and cut a large Y-shaped incision into the girl's chest with a sharp, long blade and separated the fractured ribs that were not uncommon after CPR compressions. Since dead people didn't bleed, there was only minimal oozing along the incision.

After cutting the cartilage that held the remaining ribs to the sternum, Ramos folded back the skin to expose Holly's heart and lungs. "This girl was a heavy smoker." He directed Jake's attention to the less than pink lung tissue he had just sliced into. "Her heart is somewhat enlarged and shows some signs of cardiomyopathy," he looked up at Jake to explain, "that's a muscle weakness."

"After the heart is weighed, I'm going to have some tissue samples sent to histology. Since the police report indicated that there had been cocaine use reported, I'll ask them to look for some amounts of Benzoylecgonine in her body." Benzoylecgonine was a telltale and lasting ingredient found in cocaine, an element that sometimes could be found up to a few weeks after its use in a person's bladder.

The examination continued with an ongoing litany for the tape recorder. Ramos indicated that, since the girl's stomach was nearly empty, death had been several hours following her last meal, possibly a full day or more. The information bothered Jake, but he wasn't sure how important it was or not. Larkin had indicated meeting the girls in a bar, Jake figured they'd have ingested at least drinks, pretzels or popcorn. If she had been a frequent cocaine user, that could explain why she hadn't eaten recently.

"She appears to have a small needle puncture in her antecubital fossa," the doctor pointed towards the crook of the girl's right elbow. "But there are no track marks or other visible punctures to suggest any illicit needle drug use."

A little bit more than two hours after Jake had entered the room Dr. Ramos and the resident had returned the bulk of the organs to Holly's body cavity and the resident was busy sewing up the Y-incision. Various samples of tissue were packaged and on their way to the lab for study. "Based on my initial examination, the apparent cause of death was cardiac arrest. Contributing factors would include an enlarged and weakened heart and severe blood loss."

Dr. Ramos let the resident finish sewing the cadaver closed and preparing the body for release while he went to wash up. "So Jake, are you up joining me for lunch?"

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The morning had been emotionally brutal for Julie. She attended the CISD session that her supervisor had scheduled. She was very affected by the poignant words of one of the volunteers who had witnessed the horrible carnage. He haltingly told the group and the counselor leading it about the recurring and terrifying nightmares he had when he closed his eyes to sleep. He alternately envisioned each of the women in his family as a mutilated victim, including his lovely teen-age daughter. It was heart-rending to hear him retelling his terror as he woke to check on the safety of his wife and daughter in his home. Empathy was often such an enemy for emergency workers who saw things you only imagined in gory horror movies.

Each of the participants started out by replaying the scenes that were the most prominent in their minds. The counselors had called it a mental videotape. When this man started to talk, you could hear the catch in his voice.

Julie, like so many of the other participants, found herself at a loss for the right words to reassure the man. Even though it wasn't her role to comfort him during that session, it was frustrating to Julie whenever someone was in pain. There were times when Julie needed to console herself because she couldn't heal everyone whether physically or emotionally.

In some ways, Julie knew that had been her underlying reason for becoming a paramedic, so she wouldn't feel so frustrated by a child's crying or an adult's anguish. Since her brothers were much older than her, she had only been a teen-ager when

the first nieces and nephews were born. It was always a struggle not to go pick up a crying baby at the first whimper, and she was always chided by one of her sister-in-laws for giving in to the infants too easily. And those were just simple tears. Matt always warned her that her altruistic nature would eventually do her more harm than good. She ignored his criticism and complained about his cynicism in dealing with the tragedies they came across.

She was in a hurry when she got home to take a quick shower before changing into her work clothes and reporting for her four-to-midnight shift. Her skin was still uncomfortably damp as she pulled her EMS trousers on. The shrill ring of the phone startled her as she buttoned a freshly starched uniform shirt. She balanced the receiver on her shoulder as she continued to pin her paramedic badge in place.

Her curt hello was greeted by a deep baritone voice. She really hadn't expected to hear that voice again.

Jake invited her to join him for coffee at a local diner that night. After a brief hesitation, she agreed to meet him at the all-night diner for coffee after her shift. Julie noted with some amusement that he hadn't even been put off by her blunt greeting. It was as if he was so determined to ask her out for coffee that he hadn't taken the time to listen for anything else. Despite the fact that they had only just met, Julie felt an odd but pleasant anticipation about seeing him again.

Matt and she were busy during their entire tour. They got banged out on a variety of calls ranging from a possible fractured ankle to the beginnings of an AMI, Acute Myocardial Infarction more commonly referred to as a heart attack. Most of the calls they responded to went as ALS ride-a-longs and she and Matt took turns responding with the BLS crews.

It had worked out conveniently that Julie wound up taking the juvenile with the broken arm while Matt dealt with the angry subject of a bar fight. While both Matt and Julie felt perfectly competent to handle any kinds of cases that came their way, they agreed the patient usually received it better when Julie handled pediatrics and females. Even though Julie could handle herself with a feisty patient, Matt's larger size usually proved to be a deterrent from any unexpected outbursts.

They responded to a spousal abuse case. The husband had beaten the wife and she was terrified of the man. Understandably she didn't look comfortable with any of the men that responded to the emergency either. Although she had come to, she had lost consciousness during the beating – it was a definite call for an ALS ride-a-long. Julie took the ride.

Tempting though it was, Julie bit her tongue when the patient tearfully asked her for advice during the ride. The only thing Julie would say to her was to take advantage of the social workers that could point out her list of options.

Treating without prejudice was one of the harder things to learn when Julie first started riding an ambulance even before she became a paramedic. There were

times she found herself treating an apparently guilty party of an assault, the drunk driver responsible for a fatal crash, the self-destructive overdose patient or the spouse that kept on returning to the abuse. While not having to recite the well-known doctors' Hippocratic Oath, EMT's and Paramedics had to remain professional and treat to the best of their ability and training.

As was common in many of the smaller towns, BLS crews consisting of well-trained Emergency Medical Technicians and Certified First Responders were mostly volunteers. The local towns had contracted with Paramedic Services to provide Advanced Life Support care where more advanced skills like IV drugs and intubations were necessary. When ALS was needed on a call, a paramedic would ride in the vollies' ambulance and administer care.

Julie thought it would be a bad idea to talk about Jake in front of Matt. As the night wore on and they got summoned on yet another late call near the end of their shift, she was sure that Matt sensed her anxiety building. Even when he began to pry she refused to say anything; she knew that Matt wouldn't approve. When they finally returned to base after their last call, she briefly greeted the new team on duty and excused herself claiming a terrible headache. She left Matt to re-stock most of the medications and equipment after reminding him that she had done the same for him many times before.

She was late getting there. Jake was sitting in the booth nursing a cup of coffee while he waited. He checked his watch again as the waitress smiled in his direction. The diner was simple but met the needs of night owls and graveyard shift workers with its twenty-four hour convenience. Reminiscent of a fifties diner, it was complete with jukebox and neon lights. Jake dropped a few coins into the mini-jukebox at the booth and chose some quiet melodies that weren't too brash for the late hour. Feeling nervous, he hoped she wasn't going to stand him up.



*Chelle Cordero 's Hostage of the Heart - a can't miss romantic  
suspense! - Shana Edwards Pike*



# HOSTAGE HEART

Chelle Cordero

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Chris Carron



# HOSTAGE HEART

by

**Chelle Cordero**

Vanilla Heart Publishing  
USA

# HOSTAGE HEART

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# DEDICATION

To Mark

For inspiring me with the stories he brought home from Louisiana after the storms.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My readers who keep giving me reasons to keep writing.

My kids for teaching me that miracles can happen. (and for “putting the FUN in dysfunctional”)

DMAT teams around the country, and especially NY-4, who rendered aid after hurricanes devastated parts of the Gulf Coast. And to the resiliency of the folks who met these hurricanes firsthand.

My grandma Kay Rudick who always seemed unflappable no matter what the weather was.

And always my deepest gratitude and admiration for Kimberlee Williams of VHP whose dreams have proven quite contagious.

# HOSTAGE HEART

by

Chelle Cordero

## PROLOGUE

Deanna had a heavy feeling as she headed to work. Maybe it was just those extra bills that had come due. She had been sending a large portion of her paycheck back home to her folks ever since she came to the city. There really wasn't that much paycheck to go around. She hadn't been prepared for that assessment the landlord passed on to his tenants for the boiler repair. There just wasn't any place else where she could cut spending. She already walked to and from work, never went out and spent money with her friends, and she even bought day old breads and produce rather than fresh. She counted her blessings on a daily basis that she had a job and a roof over her head, no matter how meager, but she found herself bordering on frustration every time she balanced her checkbook.

She made up her mind, today she was going to ask Rob if there was any way he could raise her salary a bit. She was willing to take on extra work; she just needed to be able to keep sending money home. The hurricanes had pretty much devastated parts of Louisiana over the last few years. The resulting tornadoes hit surrounding areas and wiped her folks out. There was no way they were able to rebuild their home and the business. She graduated high school out of a makeshift building before the last round of storms hit. Her original plans were to remain at home for a while and maybe find a job down there. Her parents had always figured she could come into the shop with them but there was no more shop to generate money. Deanna decided to go someplace where she could earn some money to send home to them. Deanna made the move to New York City and had been trying to build a life for nearly a year. A trailer sat on the site near where Deanna remembered her favorite tire swing ever since Katrina and Rita ravaged the area. Her parents didn't complain. There was no way she wanted to let them know how tight things were for her. She let them believe that money was rolling in or they never would have accepted the money she sent back home.

Clutching her purse tightly to her side, Deanna entered the bank. She was supposed to get some smaller bills for the register this morning on her way into work. She didn't like walking around with so much money, but Rob insisted that he trusted her to take care of things. Deanna wasn't naïve; she knew that her neighborhood wasn't exactly the most crime free in the city. She worried about the responsibility of carrying that much money. If she lost it, there was no way at all that

she'd be able to replace it. There never had been any temptation to take what didn't belong to her but she did allow herself a brief fantasy during the night that the wad of bills in her purse was really hers.

She stepped in line with about half a dozen other customers. She stood behind a very broad shouldered man in a suit and she had to stand on tip-toe to try to look around him to see how fast the line wasn't moving. He turned towards her and smiled as he adjusted his glasses. His brown wavy hair and bronze complexion stood out against his light brown suit. The ends of his hair brushed his collar. Deanna smiled back politely while hoping she wouldn't encourage him into a conversation. He was very attractive and she kept looking towards him when he wasn't looking at her. Under other circumstances, she wouldn't have minded trying to engage him in a conversation. But as it was, she needed to be at work soon and she couldn't forget the money she was carrying. He kept checking his watch and she wondered if he was late for some important business meeting. Deanna checked her own watch and hoped she could make it to the store in time to open the doors on schedule.

Finally the gentleman in front of her was the next in line. Suddenly there was a shout and a scream. Deanna turned and saw two men –*and there a third*–with stocking-covered faces waving very large and frightening handguns.

“Everybody get down! And keep your faces to the floor.”

All of the bank's customers obeyed immediately. When Deanna raised her head to watch what was happening, the man who had been standing in front of her gently pushed her back down.

“Do as they say,” he cautiously whispered to her from his own position on the floor.

She could see the feet of the frightened tellers as they were ushered toward the front of the counter to join the rest of the customers. One poor young man was stopped and dragged back behind the counter to empty the cash drawers into a sack. Deanna heard muffled sobbing around her.

One of the masked robbers was moving through the mass of people on the floor demanding wallets, purses and jewelry. Perhaps foolishly, Deanna decided she wasn't going to give up the store money without some kind of protest. She also slid her grandmother's birthstone ruby ring off of her hand and slipped it down her bra front for protection.

“Open your purse.”

“No.” He grabbed for it and she wouldn't let it go.

“Damn it, it's not worth dying for.” The man spoke to her again in a harsh whisper. She saw that he was eagerly handing over his own wallet.

The purse was wrested from her hand. “No. Give it back!”

He heard the gentle twang in her voice and was intrigued by it. “Don't be an idiot!” he grumbled under his breath.

Deanna raised her head and her voice in anger. "Will you just be quiet! Ow!" She felt her head being yanked backwards by the hair and she found herself staring at the stocking face of one of the robbers.

"Stand up!" She was forced to her feet. "You want to fight?" A gun was pressed against her ribcage. "I'll give you something to fight about." He started to push her towards one of the office doors.

"Where are you taking me?" Sudden terror seized her. She tried to break away but found his grip on her was too strong. "Please. I'm sorry..." Her imagination ran wild with horrible possibilities. Tears began to sting her cheeks.

"Well gee, I got me Scarlett O'Hara, boys." The bank robber laughed as he announced his find to his cohorts.

"Let her go." The man from the front of the line made a meek plea for her safety.

"Mind your frigging business!"

Deanna continued to struggle and finally broke free. The robber lunged for her. Faster than she was aware, the suited customer was standing and pushed her protectively behind him. He blocked the robber and they scuffled. She stepped backward and was terrified to see the robber gain the advantage and hold the gun to the man's temple. One arm wound its way around the would-be rescuer's neck and he was quickly subdued.

She stood trembling. "Oh Gosh, I'm sorry..."

No one else wanted to take a risk. Everyone obeyed the robbers' demands. The young teller finished filling the bag, customer pockets were emptied of valuables. The gun was still being held on the attractive stranger.

"Get back down on the floor!" The robber commanded Deanna to lie down on the floor.

She was shaking with fear and with guilt. "Please let him go."

"Lie down!"

She hesitated briefly and then did as she was told.

"Now everyone just remain where you are. Count slowly to three-hundred. If I hear any police sirens or see any cop cars, I will kill this man." The robbers began to back out of the bank with one of them dragging the struggling man with him.

Deanna couldn't let them just take the man with them, not after he had risked himself to save her. She looked up and saw a large ceramic demonstration piggy bank on the counter; as soon as she saw the robber look away, she jumped to her feet and grabbed it. She ran after the robber holding the hostage and struck him in the back of the head.

The robber stumbled. "Run!" She screamed at the stranger. He stared at her in disbelief. "Run!" Finally he made a hasty retreat to the street.



Before Deanna could get safely back into the bank, she found herself being grabbed again and this time the gun was held to her head.

“You little bitch.” The robber’s voice was raspy. “You’re coming with us instead, then.” He dragged her pleading out the doors and threw her into a van just outside on the street.

Another one of the assailants grabbed her to tie and gag her as the vehicle made a hasty retreat. About a block later, the van made a quick stop and Deanna was surprised to see the suited customer step into the van.

He looked at her in anger. “You couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you?”



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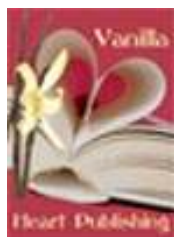
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