

*Las Vegas*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Good Samaritan

Behind her sunglasses, tears were threatening to spill. Nikki was walking quickly across the hotel lobby, but not running. She didn't lose control. She'd soon be in her room. She kept her head down, not wanting to draw attention. She'd almost made it to the bank of elevators when she ran into a wall: a hard yet resilient wall covered in cotton knit. Large hands grasped her shoulders, steadying her.

"You all right?" the wall asked kindly.

The hands holding her pushed her away gently. Her glasses had been knocked off during her collision, and the man she'd hit saw the tears that were finally spilling down her cheeks.

"Whoa there. Did I hurt you?" he asked with a touch of apprehension.

Nikki shook her head without looking up. She tried to go around, but he held her firmly.

"Please let me pass," she whispered hoarsely, still keeping her head down.

"Tell me what's wrong," he asked softly. Again, Nikki shook her head. "Come on now. Unless somebody died, it can always be fixed," he drawled.

Nikki raised her head, and the concerned look in the man's eyes was enough to shatter the rest of her control. She burst into tears; hard, ugly sobs racked her body.

Jake wrapped his arms around the weeping woman and pulled her into an alcove, sheltering her with his body while he waited for the storm to pass. He rubbed her back and tried to ignore how good she felt against his body. She'd wrapped her arms around his waist and held on tight. After about ten minutes, her sobs were reduced to sniffles, and finally, she stopped crying. He tried to push her away enough to look into her face, but she only burrowed deeper into his shirt.

"Feelin' better, honey?"

Nikki nodded.

"I'm Jake. You want to tell me your name?" Nikki shook her head. "Come on now. I feel I deserve to know your name since you cried all over me."

Nikki looked up and then back down. "Oh God, I'm so embarrassed."

"There's nuthin' to be embarrassed about. Nobody saw you if that's your concern," he assured softly.

Nikki shook her head again. "I cried all over you."

"That's okay too," said Jake. "I'm wash and wear, and so's the shirt."

Nikki puffed out a smile and finally lifted her head to look into her Good Samaritan's face.

"There now, that's better. You have a beautiful smile."

"Thank you," Nikki answered, her smile widening.

"You're welcome."

"No, I mean, thank you for getting me some privacy for my breakdown."

"No problem. Anytime you need someone to hold you, I'm your man," he answered with a grin. Nikki released her grip on Jake and pulled back. She held out her hand: "Nikki Coulson."

"Jake McAllister," he said as he shook her hand. "Well Nikki, I think you could use a good stiff drink. Then you can tell me what this is all about."

"That's not necessary."

"Yes, it is," Jake assured her as he placed his hand on Nikki's back and herded her towards the outdoor bar he'd found, overlooking the Bellagio fountains. The little terrace only held about eight tables, and the one furthest from the water was tucked into a small nook: very private and presently unoccupied.

Jake seated Nikki before settling himself into the corner. He was finally able to get a good look at the woman. She had dark honey blond hair tied back in a French braid. Little wisps had escaped and framed a kitten-shaped face. Her corn-flower blues eyes were still red-rimmed. Her generous mouth was still curved in a small smile. She was wearing a loose jacket, but he knew from holding her that she was small-boned but curvy. She was also wearing a gun in the small of her back. Before he could ask her any questions, the waitress was there to take their order.

Before asking the usual 'what'll it be?', she peered at Nikki in concern and then scowled at Jake. "Everything okay?" she asked Nikki.

Nikki nodded: "Just got some bad news. He's trying to make me feel better."

"Okay. That's okay then. I'm Sherry. What can I get you?" she asked, getting back to business.

"A mojito, if the bartender knows how to make them properly."

"You got it. He makes them from scratch, no mix." She turned to Jake. "How about you, sir?"

"Scotch. Crown Royal. Straight up. Make it a double."

"Right. I'll be right back."

Jake waited until the waitress had gone back inside the club before turning his attention to Nikki.

"Why are you wearing a gun?"

Nikki blinked in surprise. That wasn't the question she'd been expecting.

"I have a license."

"Good to know, but that's not what I asked. Why are you wearing a gun?"

"You're not easily deterred, are you?"

"No," Jake answered and waited.

Nikki looked more closely at her Good Samaritan. Brown eyes looked back at her from under the brim of a black Stetson. The left side of his face was marred with old burn scars, giving him a mottled appearance. The scarring went down his neck, into his shirt. His Stetson covered his hair, but she assumed he had black hair as this was the color of his eyebrows. He had a firm chin, and she decided that this man wasn't the kind who would take no for an answer.

Nikki sighed inwardly. She was a very private person: she didn't talk about herself. But he'd rescued her from public embarrassment and held her when she needed comforting. She placed her elbows on the table and leaned forward. In a low voice, she explained: "I consult with the FBI as a profiler in cases involving children. I don't take money, but I asked for a license to carry anywhere in the US. They were very accommodating."

Jake raised his right brow. This wasn't what he had expected. He didn't know what he had been expecting, but FBI profiler wasn't it.

"I take it that your case went south?" he asked after a few moments.

"You're good. What was your first clue?"

"I don't know," Jake drawled. "Maybe it was the angle of the sun, but I thought I detected some moisture in your eyes," he concluded with a straight face.

Nikki burst out laughing just as the waitress brought their drinks. Jake was pulling out his wallet, but she insisted on paying since she owed him. Jake was ready to argue but decided that he'd just get the next round. He couldn't remember the last time he'd spent time with a woman who wasn't related to him in some way. He was going to make this last as long as possible.

Over the next hour, he was able to get the pertinent facts from Nikki. She was a private investigator specializing in art. She also worked with Child Find. She'd been so successful that the FBI had tried to recruit her. She declined on the grounds that it was too emotionally draining. She'd work some cases, at her discretion.

The case in Las Vegas was one she'd been asked to help with. A four-year-old girl had been abducted by her mother. Her father had sole custody as Mom was certifiably insane. In fact, Mom had been in a mental institution. She firmly believed that aliens were coming to take her daughter and that her husband was in collusion with them. Mom wanted custody of her daughter in order to protect her from aliens. She'd escaped from the loony bin and gone to the girl's pre-school in Massachusetts. There were no outwards indicators of the mother's mental state. She appeared calm and well-groomed. The child had called her Mommy, and the school had no instructions against letting 'Mommy' pick up her daughter.

The father was shocked when he came to pick up his daughter and immediately called the FBI, by-passing the local police. The local FBI already had a file on the mother and acted quickly. Their first break was that the mother was still using her credit card. The FBI told the husband to leave the account open as this allowed them to follow her. She left a credit card trail all the way to Mississippi. Her movements were erratic, and she was crafty enough to only go to the bank when she was leaving town.

They lost her in Mississippi. The assumption was that she'd withdrawn enough money to stop using her credit cards and use the cash.

That's when they'd called Nikki. She had a sixth sense when it came to finding things and people. The FBI didn't want to acknowledge using a psychic, and Nikki didn't advertise her abilities.

She directed the team to Las Vegas and flew in to meet the LEOs. By the time they got past the jurisdictional bullshit and posturing and actually got out there to the

house, the little girl was dead. Mommy had hidden her daughter in an abandoned house. The child was violently allergic to dust and mold. She'd gone into anaphylactic shock and suffocated, alone in a dark room.

The mother had been holding her daughter, telling her to wake as they had to leave. The woman was arrested and taken away. She kept screaming that the aliens had taken her daughter's soul and that other children were at risk. Nikki felt responsible. She hadn't reached the child in time to save her.

"It's not your fault. You can't blame yourself."

"I was too late," Nikki was once again close to tears. "She was alive when I was asked to help. She was alive when I landed at McCarran. It took me too long to pinpoint her location. She died because I wasn't fast enough, because I wasn't good enough."

Jake took her hand. "Look at me," he ordered. He waited until he had her full attention. "She died because her mother was a nut job. If you beat yourself up every time you fail, you'll wind up a nut job yourself."

Nikki snorted. "A nut job?"

Jake nodded solemnly. "That would be the technical term," he drawled.

Nikki laughed. It was a small laugh, but it was a laugh. "Are you a psychiatrist by any chance?"

Jake sat back in his chair, a horrified look on his face. "God, no. I'm a vet."

"Oh, I guess that explains why you're so calm. Which branch?"

He was surprised; very few people ever asked that question. "Large animals," he said. "Horses and cows mostly."

Nikki blinked a few times in confusion. Then, she smiled and shook her head in self-depreciation. "Sorry, I thought you were a vet as in veteran, not vet as in veterinarian."

"Does it matter?" Jake asked neutrally. He didn't want it to matter.

"Yes, it matters. I don't remember the last time I had a conversation with someone who didn't carry a gun."

"Honey, I'm from Texas. I usually carry a gun."

"But it's not a job requirement. You don't expect to have to use it every day. It's a completely different mindset," Nikki said. She finished her drink and sat back. "Tell me about a regular day in the life of the Texas veterinarian."

Jake signaled the waitress for another round, stretched out his long legs, and talked about his work. He tried to remember every amusing incident that had happened to him. He also recounted some of the problematic cases.

Every man has a different definition of heaven: sitting on Bellagio terrace with Nikki, talking quietly into dusk, qualified for Jake. He could sit here forever.