

Prologue

Nick stumbled. He was drunk and if Chrissie hadn't been dead, she'd have been furious. Raindrops splashed off gravestones, stirring up the smell of freshly dug earth and crushed grass. Dougie caught his arm and jerked him upright.

Good man, Dougie.

His parents-in-law stared into the rectangular pit with reddened eyes and strained mouths. Chrissie's mother, Emily, sobbed as though her heart was being ripped from her throat with a grappling hook. Chrissie's dad braced his wife with an arm around her waist. Wet hair hung limply around the woman's shoulders and she looked as if she'd aged a year for every day Chrissie had been dead.

Nick's fault.

Emily sank to her knees and her husband followed, holding on grimly as if fearing she'd end up in that muddy grave with her daughter. Nick frowned. He was the one who was supposed to be howling. Beneath his alcohol-soaked despair a small kernel of envy knotted his gut. Emily's grief bespoke an agony deeper than his, as if she was being physically tortured while they all stood by and watched. He looked away.

It *hurt* to watch a mother's grief. It hurt almost as much as losing the woman you'd pledged your life to.

His fault.

If he'd paid more attention, buried his pride, *this* would never have happened. The muscles in his throat worked, but were so sore he felt as though he'd drunk paint stripper rather than single malt. Unconsciously he took a step forward. Automatically Dougie tightened his

grip on the back of Nick's jacket and held him in place.

Good man, Dougie.

Emily and Peter's remaining daughter watched him with big, rounded eyes. Ten years old, but no one was paying her any attention. She looked exactly like photographs of Chrissie at that age. Dark ringlets, bright eyes that glittered like stars when she laughed and stabbed like knives when she was mad. The kid searched his face for a glimmer of comfort, and a tiny drowning part of his brain wanted to reach out to her. But guilt paralyzed his heart like a lightning shock. He had no experience with comfort and less with guilt.

The crowd stirred and suddenly all eyes were on him. Nick felt their expectation and pity. Dougie nudged him forward and Nick held out his hand for dirt, as if he'd buried a thousand wives and knew exactly what to do. The thick clod of earth hit Chrissie's ornate casket and he made a silent vow to his dead wife. Despite the whisky in his bloodstream, pain was beginning to seep back into his brain. Dougie put an arm around his shoulders and guided him toward the outer wall of the ruins. People started to drift away.

"Are you all right?" Dougie asked.

Nick looked at his friend, truth exposed in his eyes.

No. He wasn't all right. He'd failed and God was paying him back.

Nobody came to offer condolences. He and Dougie stood awhile, just the two of them, Dougie rolling a ciggie while Nick sat on some other poor bastard's tomb. The rain battered the marble and soaked through the arse of his trousers. Silently Dougie handed him the cigarette, watching him with somber brown eyes. Cold seeped into Nick's flesh and the pewter storm clouds brought a heavy

dullness that matched the throb in his head. But he didn't want to leave. Not yet.

He took out his hipflask and shook it. *Damn*. Empty. He stuffed it back in his pocket. "I need a drink."

Turning to leave, he saw Chrissie's Ph.D. supervisor standing over her open grave. Tears ran down the man's cheeks, mixing with the rain. And suddenly there was nothing but pain. It drew a sharp knife over Nick's every thought, savaged each breath, lanced each cell like a septic boil.

"Nick..." Dougie warned.

But it was too late. The numbness had exploded into rage. Nick ran to Jake Sizemore and slammed his fist into the man's jaw. "You bastard. You bloody, fucking, bastard."

Sizemore went down, slipping on the wet grass, and Nick was on him, pounding, pounding. His one good suit was plastered in mud, his wedding shoes slipping on the rain-drenched earth, but he didn't stop. Sizemore fought, his arms fending off a really good uppercut.

"You killed her. You fucking killed her!" Nick shouted.

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen. I loved her." Sizemore twisted, grabbed one of Nick's wrists with both hands, straining away as far as he could.

There were no words to describe the hatred that fueled Nick. Every bad thing, every evil act twisted inside him until *he* became the avenger, *he* became fury, *he* lusted to kill. He slammed his fist into Jake's face, splitting skin, drawing blood. And Nick hit him again. Again. Unable to stop. Fought off Dougie, who tried to drag him away. Finally Sizemore's eyes rolled back in his head and Nick hit him again.

He raised his fist for another strike only to have it dragged roughly behind his back as he was hauled off Sizemore's unconscious body. He spat on the man who lay bleeding in the rain. Sizemore looked dead, but Nick wasn't that lucky.

"Let's away with you, Nicky, that's enough now."

He hadn't expected the priest to come. He swallowed the need to throw himself into the man's arms. Stood taller. This man was more a father to him than a man of God. "He killed her, Father." His knuckles started to sting, but it wasn't even close to the pain ripping through his heart.

"And he'll have to live with that, won't he?" Father Mike propelled Nick along the gravel path.

"He doesn't have to live with it." The cold air hurt his lungs as Nick inhaled. It made him realize just how much he'd sobered up, and how little he had left to lose.

The priest grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "Chrissie left you, son." Father Mike spoke words no one else had dared utter. "It's in God's hands now."

Grief fused Nick to the ground. Chrissie had left him, but he had loved her, and she hadn't deserved to die like that. No one deserved to die like that.

He stared at Sizemore over Father Mike's shoulders. It didn't matter how long it took. He was going to make the murderous sonofabitch pay for what he'd done to his wife.

Chapter One

Rafael Domenici, a gorgeous Brazilian post-grad student, followed her into her office. His English wasn't perfect but sure beat the heck out of her Portuguese. Susie took off her lab coat and hung it on the back of the door, uncomfortably aware of the young man's eyes following every muscle movement with the desire to touch.

It would be flattering if it wasn't so darned awkward.

"Just leave those on the desk, please, Rafael. And I'll need your literature review before I go home this afternoon." That should cure his adoration and remind him who was boss.

He didn't move. The young god just stared at her with bedroom eyes and ridiculously long lashes. Not a single line of age on that perfect face. He was twenty-two years old and had more sexuality in one little finger than most men accumulated in a lifetime.

There was a time when Susie Cooper had been comfortable flirting with gorgeous men. Not anymore. She'd once used her looks as a weapon and had been smashed into emotional spare parts for her effort. She was looking for other things now...commitment, family, kids. Ignoring Rafael's puppy-dog gaze, she sat in her chair, mechanical and biological joints creaking as she leaned forward to reactivate her computer.

Finally she sent him a tight smile of dismissal but rather than quenching the smoldering passion in his gaze, he laughed and pushed away from her desk.

"*Obrigado*, Dr. Cooper. I see you later, maybe for a drink in the pub?"

Dream on, little boy.

At that moment her other student, Lily Heathcote, appeared in the doorway and gave Rafael a hostile look. Lily was a local girl but if she was intimidated by her cosmopolitan coworker, it didn't show. Impatiently, the petite girl tapped lacquered fingernails against the doorjamb as the Brazilian angled around her, careful not to touch. A sly smile touched Lily's painted lips even though her eyes never left Susie's.

Always eccentric, today Lily was dressed in skintight leopard-print pants and a faded Cure T-shirt that had once been the color of eggplant. But beneath the layers of heavy makeup, weird clothes and incongruous blond braids sticking out like handlebars from above her ears, Lily was a nice, intelligent girl, whom Susie liked a lot. Rafael should have been attracted to his bright young peer, but maybe he only went for older women. That thought depressed the heck out of Susie.

Thirty-six wasn't old, though it was starting to feel like it. She stared at a photograph on her desk of her friend Dela Ortiz. Dela had died of an air embolism six months ago while they'd been diving off Fraser Island in Australia. She hadn't made it to thirty-five.

"You should do what I did," Lily interrupted Susie's reverie even as she leaned back to check out Rafael's butt.

Susie didn't pretend to misunderstand. She'd love to know how a girl like Lily handled guys like Rafael Domenici.

"What did you do?" Curious, Susie picked up her coffee, took a swallow of the cold, bitter brew.

"I put my hand on his dick and told him to let me know when the patch kicked in."

Susie spurted coffee all over her papers and reports. Trying not to laugh, she tore off blue lab tissue she kept in

her drawer for emergencies—right next to the cookies—and dabbed at the brown splotches. “In the States, supervisors aren’t quite that *hands-on*,” she commented dryly.

She’d only worked at this prestigious marine laboratory for one short month, but she needed to deal with her handsome pain-in-the-butt Romeo before he did or said something unprofessional. God knew, she didn’t want false rumors dogging her career. It was bad enough dealing with the fallout from her mother’s political machinations, even if Scotland was thousands of miles from Washington.

“Does he look at every woman like he wants to—” Susie broke off. It was a totally unsuitable question to ask one of his peers.

“Like he wants to lay you down and lick you from the soles of your feet to the inner recesses of your mind? Too bloody right he does.” Lily took a few steps into the room. “He gives the same look to everyone with a vagina, including Mabel.”

Mabel was the hunchbacked retirement-age cleaning lady. A lovely woman, sure...

Lily crossed her arms in a belligerent pose. “He’s an arrogant wee shite.” Lab harmony sure was off to a smooth start. “Not that you’re not hot,” she assured Susie belatedly, biting her purple-painted lips as if it had just occurred to her she might have said the wrong thing.

Susie didn’t care if she was hot or not. “I just need a way to get him to treat me like his boss and not a potential—” She broke off with a grimace. This was not how she’d imagined her supervisor-student relations would go.

Lily flashed a grin, cocked a hip. “Well, I told you

my secret and it worked for me. You could pretend to have a *really* big boyfriend.” She wiggled her eyebrows then her bottom jaw dropped as she checked the time. “Hell. I have to go. I’ve got a hot lunch date.”

And with that she rushed over, dumped her proposal on Susie’s overflowing desk, and dashed out of the room.

Susie mumbled to herself, “Here’s my report, Dr. Cooper. Gee, thanks, Lily.” But her attention was captured by a man climbing the concrete steps outside her windows. It hadn’t been much of a view until now. He was tall, long-legged, had quarterback shoulders and was clad in head-to-toe black leather with two motorcycle helmets hooked carelessly over one arm. Sweaty blond hair twisted into untidy tufts on his head, and she glimpsed a harsh unsmiling profile. Everything about him screamed pure animalistic male. No simpering eyelashes for him.

She pressed cold hands to her neck. And then he turned. Captured her gaze unerringly, assessing her through the glass with fierce green eyes.

The corner of his lips twitched before his attention shot back to the main entrance where Lily bounded out, clutching her knapsack and coat in one arm, throwing the other around his neck and giving him a big kiss on the cheek. Unwanted jealousy scratched Susie’s insides.

Oblivious, Lily threw her a wave, chatting animatedly to her “hot lunch date.” Susie pretended to concentrate on her computer screen, but not before she noted the slow sardonic grin sent in her direction from the man who towered over her diminutive student. Hot enough to scorch flesh.

The raw power of the 865 cc air-cooled twin cylinder

Triumph Thruxton vibrated through his bones, the noise from the engine a deep-throated roar. Nick eased his weight to the right to take a bend in the road, hard left for the chicane, perfect control on the well-balanced machine. Lily gripped his waist, nails digging hard enough to score the leather, but as long as she didn't fall off he didn't care.

Barely slowing, he turned off the main road, down the secluded lane leading to her cottage. He slowed the bike to a gentle crawl, tires crunching softly over the gravel. Pulling to a stop, he put his foot on the ground and kicked down the stand.

Lily jumped off and dashed up the steps to the kitchen door, tearing off her helmet.

"Mom. Mom. Nick's here!" She gave him a cheeky grin, this woman-child who hid her resemblance to her long-dead sister beneath fancy dress and war paint.

He remembered Lily the day of his wife's funeral. Ten years old—black coat, black hair, blue eyes, arsenic-white skin—the perfect miniature incarnation of his wife, Chrissie. He'd wanted to reach out to that child, but he'd had nothing to offer.

The front door opened and a woman who looked much older than her sixty-odd years hurried down the steps, unsteady on her feet. A feeling of dread fingered his heart. He curved his mouth into an easy half smile and swallowed the rough sensation of suffocation. "Emily."

From the distance in the woman's blue eyes, he knew he'd left it too long. Again. He'd stretched their relationship as thin as he dared. Lily chatted, mortaring the wounds, bandaging the blows left by tragedy.

He stepped toward Emily and opened his arms, shame burning through him when the old woman sank into his embrace like a soft, frail dove. He squeezed her

gently, held her away so he could examine the new wrinkles engraved on her skin.

“How are you, Em?”

She sniffed and blinked as if hoping to hide the redness of her eyes. Odd, considering grief was the thing she lived for. Her fingers plucked her cardigan.

“It’s always difficult this time of year.” She frowned at him, her bottom lip reproachful. “I thought you’d forgotten.”

Regret and remorse cut to the bone like a butcher’s blade. Old pain twisted in his chest until he could barely breathe.

The twelfth anniversary of Chrissie’s death.

The twelfth anniversary of his wife’s murder.

“I never forget, Em.”

“He’s still out there.” Her eyes bulged, her hands clawed his sleeve. “Waltzing around like nothing happened, like she didn’t even exist.” Vehemence infused the words with hatred, juxtaposed against such soft features. “All these years and the police never caught him. You promised me, Nick! You promised he’d be punished.”

He hugged Emily’s shoulders and they turned to walk inside. Into a house full of memories he didn’t want to remember and she didn’t want to forget. She started sobbing. All these years, and her grief was still as fresh as it had been the day they’d stood in the rain and buried her other daughter.

It didn’t matter what it took. He was going to bring the bastard who’d killed his wife to justice. And now he knew exactly how he was going to do it.