

WHAT
HAPPENED
ON
BEALE
STREET

MARY ELLIS



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WHAT HAPPENED ON BEALE STREET

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*This book is dedicated to Riley B. King,
known professionally as B.B. King, who died on May 14, 2015,
just as I was finishing this book.*

*Mr. King was a Blues Hall of Fame singer, songwriter,
and extraordinary guitarist who will be missed by lovers of the
blues everywhere.*

The thrill is gone with your passing.

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ONE

New Orleans

Nicki Price opened one eye to find an irate face looming over her in the dark room.

“Why do you pay a phone bill if you refuse to answer the thing?” Her roommate slapped the phone down on Nicki’s solar plexus, none too gently.

“I do pick up when people call during daylight hours.” Letting her cell fall to the floor, Nicki turned over and snuggled deeper under her covers.

Chloe Galen plopped down on the edge of the bed. “Nic, you’re a partner in a big-time PI agency. You need to be ready for adventure twenty-four-seven.”

“Spoken like a true artist-in-residence, who paints solely when the creative impulse strikes but under no circumstances before noon. Besides, Price Investigations is not a big-time agency. I work for my cousin for chump change.” Nicki tried to bump Chloe off the bed with her hip. “Isn’t it the middle of the night? Why are you still up?”

“Because whenever I doze off, your stupid phone wakes me up. How can you stand the theme song from a TV Western for a ringtone? If you don’t answer the next time it rings, I’m coming back

with a bucket of cold water.” Chloe picked the phone from the rug and handed it to her friend just as it began its annoying tune again as though on cue.

Nicki sat upright and kicked the tangled covers to the foot of her bed. “Hello?” she demanded crossly. “Whoever you are, do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Nicki?” A familiar voice on the other end sounded distant. “It’s Danny Andre.”

“Danny. I would recognize your Barry White imitation underwater.” Nicki changed her tone as every trace of sleepiness vanished. “How are you? *Where* are you? I heard you moved to the big city to seek fame and fortune. I have major news too—a new job, cool apartment, and a real live *fee-ahn-say*.” She couldn’t help grinning as she said that last bit.

“That’s great, Nic. I’m happy for you,” he said. But the subsequent moments of silence didn’t convey much enthusiasm.

Nicki’s smile vanished from her face. “Hey, what’s going on? I don’t hear anything from you for months, and then you call in the middle of the night?”

“Sorry about that. I keep forgetting normal people keep normal hours.”

“Forget about normal. What’s wrong, Danny?”

“Anything I can do?” Chloe whispered. She was lingering in the doorway.

Nicki shook her head as she dug through her nightstand for pen and paper.

“Remember our promise that we’d be able to tell each other anything? I didn’t know who else to call since my sister has had enough of me lately. This might send Isabelle around the bend.” His laugh sounded hollow.

The fact that her childhood best friend resurrected a playground pledge sent a chill through Nicki’s veins. “Of course I

remember. Nothing has changed, so spill your guts. What did you do? Knock over the Natchez Savings and Loan? Why not hide out in New Orleans? Providing you dress like a tourist, no one will find you in the French Quarter.”

Her jest fell short of its mark, while the sound of his labored breathing tied Nicki’s gut into knots. “Danny, please say something. You’re scaring me.”

“Then that makes two of us. I’m in real trouble, Nicki. I got myself into a mess.”

She closed her eyes, trying to rectify his pleas with her best friend from the sixth grade until their high school graduation. Danny Andre was the sweetest guy she knew. Everyone liked him, from their Sunday school teacher to the surly old man who kept every ball that landed in his yard. Even her mother liked him, despite insulting every other male that crossed the Price threshold. Danny was more diplomatic than a Swiss banker and twice as generous.

“How much trouble can someone get into playing a saxophone in a Memphis orchestra?” she asked.

“I play in blues clubs where I pick up gigs and fill in for regulars. My job is a far cry from the New York Philharmonic.”

“*What?* Your granny told you to stay out of the bars when you left town.” Nicki waited for a sarcastic retort, but she heard the sound of muffled sobs instead. “Sorry. No more bad jokes. Tell me what I can do to help.”

“Could you come to Memphis? Maybe bring your cousin and that new fiancé of yours? Bring some of his friends too. The more the merrier.”

Unfortunately, she hesitated a second too long. “Sure. Hunter and I will drive up as soon as he’s done testifying in court. Shouldn’t be more than a few days. I would love to see Memphis as soon as he can break away. I’ll check if Nate can—”

“I’m sorry, Nic. How stupid of me to think you could drop everything and hightail it upriver. We ain’t in the seventh grade anymore. Let’s get together when things calm down for Hunter. I’ll call you.”

“Wait, Danny! Give me your address and I’ll come this weekend even if Hunter can’t. I’m not too busy for my friend—”

But he had already hung up.

“What’s wrong with him?” asked Chloe.

Nicki turned to face her future sister-in-law. “I have no idea. I’m obviously terrible at crisis intervention. If somebody was out on the ledge contemplating suicide, I’d probably ask them to wait till after my pedicure.” She put her face in her hands and groaned.

“Give yourself a break. It’s hard to be Johnny-on-the-spot at two o’clock in the morning.” Chloe walked over to the bed and bent to give her friend a hug. “Who is this Danny person? Does my brother have something to worry about? I know for a fact Hunter is crazy about you, ‘crazy’ being the operative word.”

Because trying to get back to sleep would be a fruitless endeavor, Nicki got out of bed, slipped into her robe, and then padded to the coffeemaker in the kitchen. “Danny Andre was the only person in high school who didn’t think me weird during a weird period of my life.”

“An old boyfriend from your misguided youth rears his head?” Chloe perched on a tall kitchen stool.

“Not a boyfriend, just a friend. Danny is in trouble, but I was too busy explaining how great things were for me to help him.”

Chloe’s expression softened. “What kind of trouble? IRS liens, problem with the musicians’ union, advice for the love-lorn? Hunter could help with the first, Nate the second, and I’m your girl for the third.”

Nicki released an exasperated sigh. “I have no idea. He hung up too fast. I need to get to Memphis ASAP. Danny wouldn’t have

called unless it was serious.” As soon as she swallowed a mouthful of reheated coffee, she punched in his number. The call went straight to voice mail.

“Do you know where he lives in Memphis?”

“Nope.”

“Yet you’re going to jump on a plane.”

“Yep. He and Christine Hall were my closest friends. Danny refused to ask someone to our prom so we could go as a pack of nerds. Now that Christine is dead, I need to step up to the plate.” Nicki poured coffee into a travel mug.

“What about your job?”

“PI work isn’t like being a bank teller, Chloe. Nate and I have to wait for clients to hire us.”

“Do you plan on telling my brother where you’re going?”

Nicki stopped fussing with sugar packets. “Of course I will, but I don’t want to call him until the sun is up. One of us should get a decent night’s sleep. Until then I’ll take a shower and pack a bag. The more I replay the conversation with Danny, the more I think I shouldn’t waste time.”

With that she walked back to her room and into the bathroom, curtailing Chloe’s questions. Steam soon enveloped her in a moist cocoon, but Nicki found no solace. The fear in Danny’s voice echoed in her ears. Why had she been so blithe, so careless with his request? It wasn’t as if he pestered her with one demand after another.

By the time she was dressed and had dried her hair into a mane of curls, the love of her life had arrived. Hunter Galen was sipping coffee at the table when she walked back into the kitchen.

“Rumor has it you and I are going to Memphis. It’s one of my favorite cities—birthplace of the blues and home of the tastiest barbecue in the South.” Hunter smacked his lips and reached for her hand. “Good morning, my love.”

Nicki threw her arms around him while scowling at her roommate over his shoulder. Chloe simply shrugged and offered her an adorable smile.

“What are you doing here, sweet man?” Nicki kissed the top of Hunter’s head, his hair still damp from a shower. “You have a big day ahead of you. Your busybody sister must have forgotten you have to testify in court or bad people will get away with murder.”

Chloe placed a cup of coffee on the table and slunk from the room.

“I couldn’t sleep anyway.” Hunter tightened his arms around her waist. “What’s up with your friend? Is this the knight who rescued you from a snake-infested island? Nate said the guy swam out from shore to carry you back in a pirogue.”

“You already called my cousin?”

“Yes, on my way here. I needed to know about any rascal who would invite you to visit at two a.m.”

“I’m going to slap your sister silly,” Nicki fumed.

“I’d pay a dollar to watch, but first tell me the story about snake island.” Hunter kneaded her back with his long fingers.

“Nate and his pals stranded me in the middle of a swamp without a pole or oars. I couldn’t use my hands for paddles because gators live in that water. My cousin planned to return when the moon rose. Danny heard about their prank at the Dairy Queen and rescued me first. But he certainly didn’t swim. He paddled out in another pirogue and towed mine back. My, how stories change with each retelling.”

“I would love to meet so brave a hero.”

Nicki buried her face into Hunter’s starched shirt, trying to forget the panic in Danny’s voice. “I can count on one hand the times Danny asked me for anything. Today he gave me a chance to even the score, and what did I do? Rambled on about how great life is ever since I found true love. How could I be so self-centered?”

“Chloe said he woke you up from a dead sleep.”

“If you heard how scared he sounded, Hunter, you wouldn’t make excuses for me.”

“I would make excuses for you even strapped to a rack beneath a pendulum blade.”

Nicki pulled away. “Something bad has happened. I need to go to Memphis but haven’t decided whether to drive or fly.”

“I’ll ask the DA to petition the court for a continuance and book us on the next flight.” Finishing his coffee, Hunter got to his feet.

“No, sweet man. Thank you, but you don’t want to annoy the judge. Besides I’m a licensed PI, equipped to swim through whatever snake-infested waters Memphis has.” Nicki reached for her shoulder holster and Beretta from the shelf above the stove.

“Have you ever been to Memphis, Nicolette? Have you spent time in the clubs and smoky after-hours dives where musicians congregate?”

“No, but Danny was a former choir boy at First Baptist Church of Natchez. I doubt he would hang out in those places.” She placed a bottle of water into her bag.

“People change. I’m sure singing gospel on Sunday mornings didn’t cause whatever trouble he’s in.”

Nicki pivoted to face him. “You need to be in court. I’ll do what I can and come back before you miss me.”

Hunter lifted her chin with one finger. “Humor me by asking Nate to go with you. Memphis is no place for a brand-new detective, male or female. Before I leave for court, I’ll arrange your flight, hotel, and have a rental car waiting at the airport. Please, *cherie?*”

Nicki grinned. “But Nate was the one who stranded me on that island, remember?”

“I remember. Rest assured that history won’t repeat itself in

the Mississippi delta. And if you'll be in Memphis for a while, I'll fly up once I'm done testifying. I know some special places you will like."

"You have a deal, Galen. Call the airlines while I finish packing. Then I'll enjoy pressing Nate's buzzer until he drags himself out of bed."



However, when Nicki arrived at her cousin's apartment, the door was ajar. Drawing her weapon, she crept inside, fully prepared for mayhem. But by the time her eyes adjusted to the dark, she heard the sound of water running in the bathroom and someone humming the Mississippi State fight song.

She inched her way to Nate's bedroom, where a half dozen shirts and pairs of trousers had been strewn across the unmade bed. "Nate?" she called from the hallway. "It's Nicki. Why is your door wide open?"

Her new business partner emerged from the bathroom dressed in jeans and a sport shirt. "Because Hunter called and said you were on your way. Give me another ten minutes and we can be off." Nate took his gun from the nightstand drawer along with an extra clip of ammunition.

"You'll come to Memphis without begging or bribery?" Nicki remained where she stood, not wishing to invade his private space.

"Sure, why not? We don't have any cases at the moment, and your well-heeled fiancé insists on paying our expenses no matter how long we're gone. And that's just two of my reasons." Nate placed his shirts and pants into a suitcase and then dumped everything else on top unceremoniously.

"I'm not sure why Hunter wants to help Danny. He doesn't know him."

“Because he doesn’t want you driving your car or staying in a cheap motel in a bad neighborhood. And, frankly, I don’t either or I wouldn’t be taking expense money from him. Danny was my friend too, Nic, and Natchez boys stick together.” Nate zipped up the case and then said, “Are you ready? Hunter said he booked us on a nine o’clock flight.”

Nicki blinked, confused. Because Danny hadn’t played sports in school, the two barely knew each other. “Wait a minute. Did Hunter tell you to act like this dynamic duo thing was your idea? So I wouldn’t get my feathers ruffled?”

“Don’t overthink this, Nic. An expense-paid trip to somewhere I haven’t been sounds like a vacation.”

She sighed but decided to give in gracefully. “Okay, but let’s leave before Hunter hires a private bodyguard for me.” Turning, she pulled her case out the door.

I’m in real trouble, Nicki. I got myself into a mess. Each time Danny’s words replayed through her mind, the uncomfortable feeling in her gut turned downright ominous.

TWO

Memphis

Nate pressed the button to lower the window once they reached Riverside Drive. Moist, humid air wafted inside, negating the car's air-conditioning. He would be hard-pressed not to behave like a tourist because, at the moment, that's what he was. Before setting up his office in New Orleans, he'd spent little time in cities. The small town outside Natchez where he grew up didn't appear on maps beyond the county level. Even the town where he went to college, Starkville, paled in comparison to Memphis, especially when students went home for summer vacation.

This sprawling metropolis at the junction of Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas attracted the brightest and best from one end of Old Man River to the other. Memphis had inspired countless stories, songs, poems, and young men's dreams from B.B. King to Mark Twain to small-town boys like Nate. He hoped Danny Andre's visions of fame and fortune hadn't led him down an alley of no return. Nicki, who had barely said a word since their plane landed, stared at a coal barge as though she didn't see the identical sight in Louisiana on a regular basis.

"Are you all right, cousin?" he asked, turning off the radio.

A shrug served as her reply.

“According to the GPS, we’re almost to the hotel booked by Mr. Deep Pockets.” The bait Nate dangled generated no quick retort. Usually, Nicki jumped to defend Hunter against even the most minor disparagement, but not this time. “I’m hoping this place throws in a free breakfast buffet like the chains along the interstate. Don’t you just love those cool waffle machines with little jars of marmalade?” He grabbed her knee and shook it, a knee covered by a long, ladylike skirt.

“Fancy places don’t offer free breakfasts, but maybe you’ll find a fruit basket in your room or a bowl of nuts in the lobby.” Nicki spoke with straight-up sincerity, not with her usual sassy tone.

“Take it easy, kid. Things will be fine. Andre was probably over-reacting about his car getting towed or his cat running away. A quick trip to the impound lot or the county pound and his world will look rosy again.”

“You can’t be serious.” Nicki turned her focus to a street sign. “Hey, we just passed Beale Street, where most of the blues clubs are.” She punched the redial button on her phone for the twentieth time since the airport.

“Yes, but we need something to narrow our search. Danny still isn’t picking up?” Nate waited at the traffic light, unsure whether right turns on red were legal in Tennessee. A blare from a car horn answered that particular question.

“No. It just rings and rings. No voice mail, no answering machine.”

“Who else could we call? Does he have family in town?”

Nicki pulled her address book from her purse. “Danny will kill me if I call his sister and worry her over nothing. They lived together for a while when he first moved to Memphis. He sort of drove her crazy with typical guy stuff, like socks all over the apartment and cleaning his fishing tackle with Izzy’s good hand towels.”

“Women can be such neat freaks. Did I ever meet her? Izzy Andre sounds like a Cajun slushy.”

“How could you not have met her? Our high school wasn’t that big. She went by the name Isabelle and would be around your age.”

Nate turned down a side street to drop Nicki off under the hotel’s covered porte cochere, thinking about Isabelle Andre.

Oh, he remembered Danny’s sister all right, but their acquaintance had been limited to him admiring her from afar. Queen Isabelle would have crossed the street to avoid bumping into him or any other sports jock. She was supermodel pretty, with waist-length black hair, green eyes, and porcelain skin that indicated Creole blood from long-forgotten ancestors. She thought most male classmates were destined to cut her grass or clean the skimmers of her future pool. Female peers were either competition to be bested or so unworthy they deserved only pity. Somehow Nicki had avoided either category. His cousin seemed to truly like the woman, and from what he could gather, the feeling was mutual. The last he heard, Izzy had married her college sweetheart upon his admission into some expensive law school. The fact she was now living in Memphis struck him as odd.

“Why don’t you hop out here and get us checked in?” said Nate, shaking off the past. “I’ll park in the garage and carry our bags to the lobby.”

“Hang on a minute.” A moment later Nicki spoke into the mouthpiece. “Hey, Izzy, it’s Nicolette Price from Natchez. I got a bizarre call from your brother that spooked me. Danny may be in hot water and he’s not picking up. Anyway, I happen to be in Memphis, so please call me with his address. I plan to drop by to punch him in the nose for scaring me in the middle of the night.” Nicki recited her number, ended the call, and thumped her head on the dashboard. “I hate it when I ramble on like that. Izzy already has my number, and I sounded like a total moron.”

“No more so than usual.” Nate reached behind her to open the door. “This boy is salivating for something to eat. Is it too early for sweet-and-tangy baby back ribs?”

Nicki produced a frightful face but got out of the car. Ten minutes later, dragging her suitcase and his, Nate walked into the grand lobby of the Carlton Hotel. “Grand” did not do the place justice. He let his gaze scan the interior from the marble floor up to the ornate, chandeliered ceiling the way someone would admire a famous masterpiece. Dark hardwood panels were polished to a high gloss, sparkling *étagères* displayed memorabilia from decades long ago, and recessed spotlights illuminated portraits of those responsible for the hotel’s illustrious past.

Nate approached the central courtyard, in which a fountain rose from a marble pond, complete with resident fish. Bistro tables and chairs awaited those wishing a late night snack, along with sofas and chairs grouped for intimate conversations. A wide mezzanine with access to second-floor rooms encircled the lobby, giving the lobby a European ambiance. Everything and everyone in the hotel spoke of old money and exquisite taste.

“Not like you to admire something unconnected to pro sports.” Nicki poked his side with her purse.

“When your fiancé calls ahead, he certainly spares no expense. I’m hoping the front desk didn’t book us into the honeymoon suite.”

“Ha, almost. The guy kept calling me *Mrs.* Price and clucked his tongue when I said adjoining rooms wouldn’t be necessary. Apparently, he never heard of cousins or siblings traveling together. Elevators are this way. I can’t wait to take off these heels.”

After Nicki had swiped her keycard in a door on the seventh floor, Nate preceded her into a room that could only have been eclipsed by the presidential suite. “Holy cow. Look at the space in here. Why don’t I sleep on the sofa and save Hunter some dough?” He pointed at an overstuffed couch in an alcove.

Nicki plopped down on the bed. “Nothing doing. If we’re still here next Friday, Hunter’s flying up to take me out to the best spots in town. He’ll bunk in your room.”

“What, no third suite?” Nate teased.

Nicki giggled. “He suggested that, but I said no way. He can save his money for our wedding. I don’t even want to know what this place costs.”

“Try Danny’s number again.” Nate gazed on the Mississippi River from her window.

As Nicki reached for her purse, her phone burst into the theme song for *Rawhide*. “Hello? Hey, Izzy, thanks for calling me back.”

Eager to check out his room, Nate headed to the door to give her some privacy.

“Slow down. I can’t understand what you’re saying.” Nicki scrambled off the bed. “You’re in his apartment right now?”

Nate let go of his bag and circled the four-poster bed so he could gauge her expression. “What’s going on?” he asked. Nicki had paled to the color of milk.

She motioned to the pen and pad on the antique desk. “Okay, take a deep breath and give us Danny’s address. Nate came to town with me.” Nicki began scribbling the moment he handed her the pen. “We’re on our way. In the meantime, don’t touch anything and try not to worry.”

Nate clamped a hand on her wrist to get her attention. “Tell her to hold on. Talk to me, cousin.”

“Hold on a second, Izzy.” Nicki covered the mouthpiece with her palm. “After she listened to my message, she went straight to Danny’s apartment. I guess I freaked her out. The place is a wreck. Overturned furniture, the coffee table smashed, and somebody punched a hole through a wall. And...and there’s blood on the kitchen floor, lots of it.”

Nate steadied her with a firm hand. He’d never seen her so

flustered. “Follow standard procedure. Tell her to call the police and that we’re on our way.”

Nicki did as instructed and then thrust the address at him with trembling fingers. “Good thing we have GPS. I have no idea where this is.”

He tucked her phone into her purse. “Did Izzy say how much blood? Like from a broken nose or like someone bled out?”

“I don’t know. Stop asking stupid questions.” Nicki burst into tears.

“Sorry. As soon as you change shoes, we can go.” Nate pointed at the ridiculous high heels Chloe undoubtedly told her to wear.

“Good idea.” Nicki dug her sneakers from her suitcase and threw the offending shoes across the room. “But I’m taking my gun and don’t try to stop me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

A few minutes later Nate closed the door to her luxury suite behind him. While they hurried down the hall, he slipped the clip into his weapon and tucked it into his shoulder holster. By the time the elevator door opened, all thoughts of a relaxing vacation had vanished like mist on the river at sunrise.

It took ten minutes to reach Danny Andre’s last known address. In that short period of time, they moved from the world of luxury getaways and top-tier corporate expense accounts to a jungle of abandoned warehouses, tenement apartments, and decayed early twentieth-century houses. Thugs with nowhere to go and nothing but trouble to get into lingered on street corners and in doorways of abandoned homes. At least, Nate hoped no human inhabitants dwelled within.

“We’re here.” Nate disconnected the GPS and shoved it beneath the seat.

Nicki remained still with her eyes clenched shut, but her moving lips revealed she was praying.

“Don’t worry about those men, Nic. We’re both packing, and I know you’re a crack shot.”

“You think I’m worried for myself, Nate? I’m hoping this is all a horrible mistake. Maybe Danny left three pounds of ground meat on the counter to defrost and rats got into it. Men can be so thoughtless at times. Soon he’ll come home from a friend’s house and wonder what all the commotion is about.”

Only his cousin could dream up such a scenario. But, frankly, there wasn’t half the amount of commotion Nate expected at Danny’s residence. Only one police cruiser was parked at the curb, and he didn’t see a forensic van or an unmarked sedan belonging to a detective. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

Nicki met his eyes and nodded. “He’s my friend, but I’m also a professional investigator.”

“Even seasoned veterans sit out cases that hit close to home. There’s no shame in staying here while I go inside.” He tried to sound as nonjudgmental as possible.

With a snort Nicki jumped out of the car. “We know nothing at this point, so stop babying me.”

Nate had to hurry to keep up with her. If any street thugs had evil thoughts, they would have had a hard time catching them. Unfortunately, without a working elevator, three flights of dirty concrete steps separated them from Danny’s floor. Halfway down the hallway, a uniformed cop leaned against a doorjamb, smoking a cigarette.

“Man, doesn’t that guy know this building is a firetrap?” Nate muttered.

Nicki had reached the open doorway. Stepping in front of her to enter the apartment first, Nate was initially surprised by the threadbare, spare furnishings in the drab living room. His bachelor status, along with zero decorating abilities, guaranteed his New Orleans townhouse would never be featured in a magazine,

but Danny's apartment was the saddest representation of human existence he'd ever seen. Although neither dirty nor cluttered, nothing within view could have come from anywhere other than curbside discards. A pang of sorrow filled his gut, despite the fact he barely knew the man.

"Hello?" he called. "Private investigators Nate and Nicolette Price from New Orleans."

A cop stuck his head around the corner. "You're a long way from home, Mr. and Mrs. Price. Be careful you don't contaminate my crime scene."

Snapping out of her fog, Nicki squatted down to evaluate the contents of the smashed coffee table.

"For the record, my partner and I are cousins, not spouses. Any sign of struggle in the other rooms?" Nate pulled on gloves and tossed a pair to Nicki.

"Somebody rummaged through the dresser drawers, and then we have this in here." Officer Flynn, according to his badge, pointed at a nasty pool of dried blood.

"What is that officer at the door doing that he let two sightseers wander into a crime scene?" A second cop glared up from where she marked blood spatter for the forensic team. Her name badge indicated a surname of Ryan.

"I got a call from Danny Andre. He's my friend." Nicki stepped into the cramped kitchen and gasped. Despite her previous assurance to the contrary, the sight of this particular blood caused her to stagger.

"Hey! I'll tell you the same thing I told the guy's sister. Go sit in our squad car downstairs until I have time to take your statement. I won't have people fainting or puking into potential evidence before the techs get here." Officer Ryan's tone conveyed no sympathy.

Nate stepped between the two women. Looking at Nicki, he

said, “If Izzy is here, why don’t you find out what she knows while I do the same up here?” When she started to protest, he cut her off. “Think for a moment. Izzy is probably scared to death and could use a friend.”

“I’ll be downstairs when you’re ready for my statement about the phone call.” She glanced at the blood spray on the refrigerator and the coffee carafe smashed against the wall, and then she slowly backed from the room.

Officer Flynn opened his notebook. “How do you know Mr. Andre?”

Nate’s gaze landed on what looked like a bicuspid molar. He hoped the bloody tooth belonged to Danny’s adversary.

“We were all friends in high school. He called Nicki last night and asked her to come to Memphis because he was in some kind of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Flynn’s brows knit into a straight line.

“He didn’t say and apparently regretted making the request afterward.”

“What request is that?” Officer Ryan resumed marking blood droplets.

“For Miss Price to come to Memphis.” Nate spoke slowly and succinctly.

“Was Andre a user—crack, meth, pills? Know what his drug of choice happened to be?”

“He wasn’t a user, to my knowledge. Why would you draw such an assumption? Were drugs found inside the apartment?” Nate bit his inner cheek to keep his voice level.

“Not so far, but did you happen to notice the neighborhood on your way over? Only dopers, hookers, and ex-felons who can’t figure out a new career path live here.” Officer Flynn examined the streaky window glass.

“And those whose take-home pay won’t buy a three-bedroom ranch out in the suburbs with a white picket fence.”

Flynn pulled off his gloves. “That where you live in Orleans Parish? Maybe in the Garden District, home of blue-blooded dinosaurs and the bleeding heart, artsy types?”

“Actually, I live in the warehouse district—artsy, but a notch above this, socioeconomically speaking. How about you, Flynn? Where do you hang your hat after work?”

“Back to your corners, both of you.” Officer Ryan got to her feet. “I’m not sure why you’re still here, Mr. Price. You’ve had a look around. Perhaps your friend will call and clear this up. Leave your number in case we hear anything.”

Nate held out his card. “We’re staying at the Carlton while in town.”

“*The Carlton?* Talk to me again about socioeconomics,” Flynn all but snarled.

Nate left his card on the counter and strode from the apartment. To rein in his temper, he took his time on the three flights of steps down. Sparring with the police wouldn’t help Nicki or Danny. As he approached a car by the curb, he spotted Nicki and a woman deep in conversation. He knocked on the window to get their attention.

“How ya feelin’, Nicki?” he asked when they both got out. “And you must be Izzy Andre. I’m Nate Price. Pleased to meet you.” He stuck out his hand toward the tall, leggy brunette.

The woman blinked and stared as she shook hands. “I’m fine, thank you, Mr. Price. I believe we met in high school. You’re Nicki’s new boss?”

“That’s me. Somebody has to teach this greenhorn the ropes.” Unfortunately, his response would have been more appropriate at a hometown reunion instead of their present circumstances.

“Danny mentioned Nicki was pursuing her dream of becoming an investigator.” She placed her hands on her slim hips.

“Well, Izzy, we’re here to help any way we can.”

“Only my closest friends call me Izzy. I don’t really know you, Mr. Price.”

Unfortunately, the Mississippi River was too far away to throw himself into. “I beg your pardon, Miss Andre. I got used to hearing Nicki—” Nate shook off the pointless rationalization. “I stand corrected, ma’am.”

“What did you learn upstairs? The police shooed me out when the sight of so much blood made me queasy.”

“Understandable. I saw obvious signs of a struggle but not of forced entry. Danny apparently let whoever he got into a fight with into the apartment. They’re also looking for evidence of drug use.”

Isabelle glanced at Nicki as though for confirmation. “Go on.”

“Somebody rummaged through his drawers, but it could have been Danny earlier today. Maybe he was looking for a particular garment. Although there’s a bit of blood, the amount wouldn’t indicate a loss of life.” Nate stuck his hands in his pockets.

“Is that it, Mr. Price?” Isabelle’s voice rose with intensity.

“For now, ma’am. The police will run the blood samples against their databases. They also bagged his razor from the drawer to determine his blood type in case Danny isn’t in the system.”

“We’ll know more after forensic techs process the apartment.” Nicki interjected, wrapping her arm around her friend.

“I will wait by the phone until I hear from my brother.” Isabelle faltered, unsteady on her feet. “Or until I receive an update from the police department.”

Nate bristled for the second time in fifteen minutes. “I didn’t say Nicki and I were finished. We intend to find him, Miss Andre.”

Isabelle pulled away from Nicki. “How can you help? You

didn't know my brother very well. Danny didn't use drugs, and he wouldn't tear apart a drawer to find a piece of clothing, not even on his wedding day. And as far as *being in the system?*" Her tone became brittle. "He's not because he is the sweetest, gentlest man on earth. Nicki, I hope you'll stay for as long as you can, but there's no reason for you to remain, Mr. Price. I'm sorry you made a pointless trip to Memphis."