

# Chapter 1

The big man sitting behind the desk must have been about seventy, Nikki thought. His large size plus the full white beard made her think of Santa Claus. All that was missing was the red suit.

Nikki Peters was there for a job interview. She'd seen the job posted online. The job title was "assistant." What got Nikki's attention was the job description. It said the work was "unique and challenging." Even better, the pay was excellent.

Nikki had a decent job at a bank. She'd managed to pay off her student loans and even save a little money. But she had become bored. At only twenty-four, she felt stuck. It

was time for a change. Now she just had to convince Hal Dempsey to hire her.

“I have a lot of experience with computers,” Nikki told him. “I can help you with your website. And I’m also good at math.”

“Those are important skills,” Mr. Dempsey said. “But tell me. Do you think you’d make a good detective?”

The question took her by surprise. At first she wasn’t sure how to answer the man. She thought for a few seconds. “I work well with people. I’m also curious and logical. Those are skills a detective would need. I think I’d be good at it,” Nikki finally said.

Mr. Dempsey was nodding. “I’ve made my fortune in mattresses, as you may know,” he said.

Nikki knew all about it. She’d done some research before applying. The Royal Mattress Company made custom

mattresses. They were well known for their personalized designs. Whatever the customers needed? A comfortable and supportive mattress was guaranteed. Nikki had read the company even supplied custom-made beds to the White House and Buckingham Palace.

“This is the situation,” Mr. Dempsey said, leaning forward. “I don’t need an assistant for the office. The person I hire will help me with some personal business. You see, I have two sons. Dylan is the oldest. He works for the company.” Then Mr. Dempsey frowned. “My younger son is Colin. He’s never wanted any part of the business. It’s been hard for me to accept. And I’m seriously thinking of taking him out of my will. That would mean leaving everything to Dylan.”

Nikki was listening carefully, wondering what her role in this would be.

“Colin has become a disrespectful, good-for-nothing bum. Now I think he might be a criminal as well,” Mr. Dempsey said. “I need someone to find out what my son is up to. That’s where the job of my assistant comes in.

“If you’re hired, Ms. Peters, I need you to get close to Colin. Bring me all the facts. There’s only so much I’ve been able to find on social media. I don’t want to make my decision until I know everything. Disowning my son is a drastic step. I need to know I’m doing it for the right reasons.”

Nikki was only half-listening to this last part. The word *criminal* had made her wonder. What had Colin done? And if it was that serious, why hadn’t Mr. Dempsey hired a private investigator? “What kind of crime do you suspect him of?” Nikki asked.

“Nothing violent,” he said. “But it’s bad enough. I’ve heard he may be scamming elderly people out of their money.”

As long as the crime wasn't murder, Nikki was ready to accept the job.

"You're hired. Will you come work for me?" he asked.

"Wow! Thank you. Yes, I would love to," Nikki said.

"That's great. And I insist that you call me Hal. All my employees do."

"Thank you, Mr.—I mean Hal," she said with a smile.

Hal had purposely not told Nikki why he had hired her. That might have changed her mind about taking the job. He had thought about using a private investigator. But he'd tried that before. This time he wanted to take a more personal approach.

He'd interviewed several young women for the position. It was important to find someone Colin would like. Someone he would let into his life. So Hal chose Nikki. She had just the right qualities. Beauty and intelligence.

A few minutes later Nikki was walking to her car. In her hand was the flash drive containing all of Colin Dempsey's information.



Now back at her apartment, Nikki was sitting on the couch. She had printed out the information and was looking through the pages. She also checked social media. Hal had been right. There was very little she could find on Colin. But an Internet search was more helpful. There were several stories on the Dempsey family. It helped to see photos of Colin and his brother.

There were also photos of Hal's three wives. The first two were the mothers of his sons. Nikki could tell who Colin's mother was by looking at her. They looked very much alike. Now she was eager to get started. This job seemed like it was going to be exciting.

For a long time now, she had been wanting to change her life. It all started

about a year ago. She'd broken up with her boyfriend. They'd dated for two years. Bart Wheeler was everything Nikki had been looking for. That all changed on New Year's Eve. Bart told her the truth. He loved Nikki. But he knew he would never marry her.

That night, Nikki cried herself to sleep. After that she told Bart it was over. There was no way she'd stay in a relationship that was going nowhere. Now, finally, she felt like she was getting over him.

It was interesting to see how good-looking Colin was. Well built. Dark hair and eyes. Great smile. He could have been a model or an actor. "Wow!" Nikki said out loud. She couldn't help but think about Hal. Father and son did not look much alike.

Colin's school records weren't as impressive as his looks. The best grade he'd ever gotten was a C. Still, he'd been accepted to a top university. When he failed at that, he joined the army. Hal had forced his son to

enlist. He hoped Colin would grow up and get serious about his life. Instead Colin was kicked out. It turned out he was not good at following orders. After that there were a string of odd jobs. Fast-food cook. Cashier. Construction worker.

The next few pages Nikki looked at were part of a report from a detective agency. Colin had been involved in an Internet scam. He'd been selling fake vitamins to senior citizens. Nikki wondered what had happened to make him do something like that. He'd come from a wealthy family. There was no need to cheat innocent people out of their money.

Maybe the photos of the Dempsey family would offer some clues. Dylan was not as good-looking as his brother. He looked more like his father. And the current Mrs. Dempsey was a beautiful woman. They all looked happy, she thought. It seemed like a perfect family.



It could be that Colin felt he was being forced into behaving a certain way. And he had fought that idea. Was it that simple? Colin was just going through a phase. He was trying to find himself. Maybe he wasn't the horrible person his father thought he was.

Hal had provided Nikki with his son's personal information. His cell phone number. License plate number. Even a picture of his car. Nikki noted Colin's address. He lived downtown. She knew the neighborhood. Most of the stores there were boarded up. The apartment buildings were run-down. Litter lined the streets. Again, she couldn't imagine the son of a wealthy man living like this. The case was getting more and more interesting. She was looking forward to her investigation.



It was early the next morning. Nikki drove to Colin's neighborhood. She passed his

car, which was in front of his apartment building. Good. He was home.

She pulled over down the street and parked. Her plan for now was to wait there until he came out. Then she would follow him. After that she'd have to somehow get his attention.

About an hour had passed. Then a young man came out of the building. It was Colin. He looked terrible. Nikki watched as he walked to his car. He was stumbling. Was he sick? Then she realized something. Colin was drunk. He dug his keys out of his pocket. Then he dropped them. As he bent over to pick them up, he nearly fell over. That's when she jumped out of her car and ran over to him.