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## Chapter 3



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Nick almost smiled when he saw the gooseflesh on Lisa's arms. There were many things he didn't expect to happen today. A mystery door in the basement was only one of them. Seeing a decidedly grown-up Lisa Reno was another.

"I would say it's definitely a door." He looked around to see if any more tools were lying about. His toolbox was in the truck, and he hadn't noticed the case she brought down with her earlier. As if reading his mind, she handed him a pry bar. "Thanks."

"I didn't want to go back out to the truck." She shrugged and stood next to him as he tried to pry the door loose.

"Looks like it hasn't been sealed up too long. Look at this concrete. It was too easy to remove. A good concrete job wouldn't have crumbled like this."

"If you're trying to get hired, you've got the job." Lisa laughed at his serious expression.

He looked up at her from his position, bent over to loosen the bottom of the door, arching an eyebrow. "Concrete porosity is important, but I'm glad they didn't do a good job on this

one.” He did one final yank. The door budged, sending a spray of dust and debris over them as it opened. They stood, side-by-side, looking into the darkness, reeling from the wave of odors. It almost made him rethink their exploration.

“What is it?” She looked at him, her watering eyes wide with wonder. “A secret room? Maybe a tunnel?”

Nick pushed away the cobwebs in the doorway. “There’s a breeze coming from inside.”

She handed him her flashlight and put both hands over her face. “Unfortunately, the breeze isn’t helping. Are you sure you want to go in there? I’m not sure how much more I can take.”

“I’ll go alone if you want me to.”

She attempted to take a deep breath but stopped and shook her head instead. “I’ll go.” He could imagine the war inside her head – to face whatever was in there or get out of here as quickly as possible. “You first.”

“I was always taught, ‘Ladies first.’”

Lisa shook her head furiously. “I’ll fore-go the niceties this time if you don’t mind.”

He took the flashlight and turned it on. “Right. Are you Nancy Drew, or am I one of the Hardy Boys?” He shined the light into the blackness, checking the ceiling, floor, and walls. Nothing but a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling, and it looked ancient.

Lisa pulled the chain attached to the light but got no response. “The flashlight will have to do. Wait a minute.” She stopped to dig into her pocket, pulling out her keys, complete with a key-chain flashlight. “I have this little one, too. And you’re showing your age. Maybe Bones and Booth?”

He never expected to enjoy this. He hadn’t felt this comfortable with a woman since . . . well, in a long time. “You’re dating yourself, too. Bones hasn’t been on in a few years.” He shook his head. “Considering the odors in this

house, ‘Bones’ might be more realistic. Plus, I knew you wanted to be the smart one.”

“Can’t deny what’s true.” She was systematically scanning her surroundings.

She knelt, shining her small beam in front of her. “Look at this.”

He flooded the item with the larger flashlight. “Whatever it is, it’s old.” He picked up the piece of rusted metal and put it in his pocket. “I’ll check it later, aboveground.”

They continued to follow the light and the smell coming from somewhere down the dark path.



“ARE YOU STILL BACK THERE?”

“You couldn’t get rid of me that easily.” She was going to stick as close to him as possible. It wasn’t exactly that she was scared, more that she wasn’t fond of tight spaces in the dark. Especially in the dark. There was something ominous about creeping along with the smell of death all around them.

Nick continued, his flashlight shining on the floor, the walls, and the ceiling, to make sure they didn’t run into anything.

Or anyone.

When he stopped abruptly, Lisa plowed right into his solid back.

“Sorry. Tree root.” He shone the light around a slightly larger area. “Lisa, look over there.”

His flashlight jiggled in the direction he wanted her to look. “Is that . . .” She screamed when she felt something cross her foot. Her voice shook. “I don’t know what is over there, but I’m pretty sure I just felt a rat walk over my foot.”

She stood there, her eyes closed in near panic. When Nick

tightened his hand on her arm, she felt him shaking. Were they in danger?

“Lisa. Open your eyes.”

Reluctantly, she looked down at the furry creature next to her foot. Then another, and another. She looked up at Nick to see him laughing. “I think you’re safe.”

There were five kittens, two calicoes, one gray-striped, one black, and one marmalade, all being herded to safety by their mother, a gray tabby cat.

“Oh, my goodness. How did they get in here?” She held her hand out to the mother cat, but there was no way the cat was going to trust a human who almost stepped on her children. What was she thinking? “They’re so sweet.”

“I guess they got in from the other end. It’s for sure they didn’t come in from the basement as we did.” He walked ahead, toward his original focus, leaving her to admire the kittens. “I’m afraid we may have a bit of a problem.

“What kind of problem?”

He focused his flashlight on a mound of material in the corner.

Whoever had left the body here hadn’t expected anyone to find it.