



BURY THE LEDE

a Nikki Nielsen novella

by Joni Hubred

Chapter 1

The antidote for a brutally cold Minnesota winter exists in a perfect Minnesota summer day when cool, clear water laps across sand and gravel beaches and wispy clouds skitter aimlessly across an endless blue sky.

This was not one of those days.

As I began my career as a reporter for the Northridge Press, the glorious dew from those Ten Thousand Lakes that we are the Land of formed a sweaty glue between my skin and clothing. I slapped at mosquitoes that had swarmed into my crappy hotel room through quarter-sized holes in the window screens, then checked my makeup in the cracked bathroom mirror. This steamy mid-July morning marked the beginning of my new life, and I wasn't about to screw it up. Again.

My name is Nikki Nielsen, and hiring on as a voluntary slave at our small town's fifty-year-old newspaper really wasn't my idea. But the opportunity to work with my uncle, Ernie Hansen, pulled me from the depths of despair after a messy divorce from one of the richest men in town.

Jeffrey Carlson had found a way to commit adultery, move his mistress into our house, and still emerge with the lion's share of his fortune and powerful reputation intact.

I lost my home, my share of the company, and my position on the board. The final blow, losing custody of my four-year-old daughter, Kelly, to her cheating father and perky new step-mom, drove me hard into the ground.

Getting ready for my first day of work in months took all the energy I had. Fortunately, my career as a corporate officer had left me with an extensive professional and "business casual" wardrobe, so at least I had that going for me.

Ernie hired me only after significant cajoling from my mother. True confession: Except for a brief stint at the St. Cloud State University Chronicle, I have never actually worked as a reporter. Ernie had never hired one, so to Mom, we seemed like a perfect match.

Honestly, I think it scared him a little to take on a depressed, resentful, broken and beaten divorcée, even if she was his only niece. I hoped the strappy tan sandals paired with a cream-colored linen suit and peach blouse would bolster his confidence in me, but then I arrived twenty minutes late and blew the effect.

Ernie bellowed my name just seconds after I walked in the door. I crept timidly into his office and found him looming over a massive oak desk covered in stacks and stacks of paper. As I found a chair, he walked around and leaned against the front of the desk, arms crossed over the front of his short-sleeved white dress shirt.

“Young lady, I know you’re having some tough times, but that doesn’t mean you get any special treatment here, understood?” He punctuated the sentence by jabbing an ink-stained finger in my direction.

I nodded, kept my head low, and grumbled a little inside. Just as the words, It’s only twenty minutes, old man, don’t get your shorts in a bunch crossed my mind, Ernie bellowed, “And I don’t care if you’re five minutes late or fifty. I get here on time, everyone else gets here on time. I expect the same of you.”

My head snapped up, and I met his stony gaze. After months of wallowing in pain, of not only giving in to but encouraging my own suffering, someone finally jerked me up by the lapels of my Calvin Klein jacket said, “Life sucks. Let’s move on, shall we?”. Truth be told, it felt pretty good.

“Now, get your ass out to Rolling Oaks Cemetery, somebody tore the place up, it’s a mess,” Ernie growled, handing me a dusty gray camera bag that had been sitting on a shelf above his desk. “Goddamned kids. Nobody ever desecrated a grave in my day, we had respect and no time for this kind of nonsense. Graves of veterans, for Pete’s sake, men who gave their lives so those punks have the freedom to be assholes.”

Ernie's voice carried through the back of the building as I headed out. He served in Korea, God bless him, and had absolutely no patience for disrespect. As I turned the key to rev up my trusty-but-rusty Mercury Cougar XR7, I realized I didn't either.

The drive to Rolling Oaks took about ten minutes, not quite long enough for me to fiddle with the radio knobs, so the dial remained at WNED-AM, a local station that served Northridge, Ellendale, and Dakota, in southern Dodge County.

Owned by the Magnusson family, the place was literally kept alive by patriarch Hank Magnusson, a barrel-chested man with a voice that rattled windows, and his tiny wife Edna, a sweet-tempered woman with large, violet eyes, a crisply sprayed crown of blonde hair, and the screechiest voice west of the Mississippi. He handled the broadcasts, she sold advertising. They supplemented their income by renting out most of the land on which the tiny, white broadcasting headquarters sat.

The four Magnusson children apparently had no interest in radio, so after forty years, it was just Hank and Edna, and Ethan Mikkelson, a 19-year-old college kid they hired to handle the night shift. With a soothing, tenor voice and a great ear for indie and alternative music, Ethan quickly developed a strong and loyal following – including me.

While that gave the station a boost, WNED's greatest source of revenue has been a steady stream of live high school sports broadcasts and religious programming. Long story short, WNED is not now and never has been, a "news" station. So when I heard Hank's booming baritone interrupt a chorus of "Holy, Holy, Holy" with breaking news, I cranked up the volume.

"Late last night or early this morning, vandals toppled gravestones and tore up the property at Rolling Oaks Cemetery, just north of town on County Road 12. Northridge Police are investigating, and Chief Daniel Sullivan tells our reporter that the crime was likely committed by local teenagers. Stay tuned to this station, we'll bring you updates as more information comes to us."

As I later learned, Edna stumbled upon the crime scene while driving into town to call on a couple of regular advertisers about fall sports sponsorships. She chatted with

Acting Police Chief Dan Sullivan, who made polite conversation and shook his head a few times and agreed that, yes, most likely teenagers had done the damage. It never occurred to him Edna would call Hank and Hank would repeat the second-hand conversation on air.

I knew none of that as I brought the Merc to a gravel-crunching halt in the rectangular cemetery parking lot. I only knew that I had been scooped on a stupid cemetery vandalism story my first day on the job. It pissed me off; however, good Scandinavian-Lutheran-Minnesotans don't yell or scream or let loose a string of cuss words.

While I do not want a hair trigger, I wouldn't mind some kind of trigger, even a tiny valve that would allow a little steam to escape now and again. Instead, I turn all that energy inward, which probably explains the weight I can't lose and some – or possibly all – of my domestic disasters.

It may even explain why, as I barreled full-speed toward a cluster of uniformed officers, I tripped over a small hunk of granite and sailed headlong into the grass.

I pushed myself upright and assessed the damage. Green and brown streaks covered the front of my skirt, blood leaked from a scrape on my knee cap. One of the straps along the top of my strappy sandals had torn loose from its mooring. Nothing felt broken or sprained, so I stood full up and got my first good look at the damage to Rolling Oaks Cemetery.

All of a sudden, I didn't care who broke the story. What mattered was everything broken in front of me, the dozens of multi-colored granite headstones and rows of ancient marble markers toppled and cracked. Large, jagged pieces of stone had been pushed into the ground, a loosely formed and glittering tesserae tableau. The bastards had even ripped branches from trees and bushes around the property.

This wasn't just vandalism, it was cruel, wanton, nonsensical destruction. My heart broke for the families of those whose sacred memories had been desecrated, and I swallowed hard as a wisp of fabric that had been a small American flag fluttered up

from a charred heap of grave decorations laying close to the fence line.

“Are you okay?” A loud voice startled me, and I squinted up into the bright morning sky. A hand reached down to help me up and gently caught my elbow as I reeled back a little.

“Fine,” I breathed, almost certain that wasn’t the case. I quickly wiped the corners of my eyes. “I need to see the Chief of Police.”

“You’re looking at him. Daniel Sullivan, at your service, ma’am. And you must be Ernie Hansen’s new reporter.”

“And niece. Nikki Nielsen.” I brushed at my skirt and swayed a little as I bent to retrieve the camera bag that had flown off my shoulder. Dan gently gripped my elbow, and I looked up into a pair of blue eyes that twinkled like Christmas lights. The wiry, six-foot-tall Irishman had coal black hair and a full-lipped smile that exposed blindingly white teeth. My heart fluttered unmercifully.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked with genuine concern. “I can have an EMT here in five minutes.”

“Honestly, I’m fine. Just incredibly clumsy.” I leaned away from his steadying hand and pulled a thin, narrow reporter’s notebook and pen out of the bag. “What can you tell me about this?”

He shook his head and took a deep breath that caught just a little at the end. “I’ve never seen anything like it. But we’ll catch ‘em. We always do.”

As I formulated a follow-up question, a 40-ish, chestnut-haired man, dressed in a coal black suit and white shirt caught my eye. Thick, dark brows beetled over his wide, brown eyes, and he had a graceful look that bespoke either good self-care or an excellent plastic surgeon. The grim set of his thin lips as he picked his way through the wreckage told me he wasn’t just a casual passerby.

“Nikki, this is Joshua Benton, pastor at Grace Lutheran Church. They manage the cemetery,” Dan said, extending a hand to greet the minister. “Josh, Nikki is Ernie Hansen’s new reporter.”

“This must just break your heart,” I murmured as I shook Benton’s hand.

“Actually, it makes me very, very angry.” Benton explained that Rolling Oaks had originally been a tiny lot, reserved for Grace members and their families. As the congregation grew and needed a larger home, members voted to tear down the tiny, white chapel, expand the cemetery, and open it to the public. A dedicated group of volunteers managed everything from plot sales to perpetual care. “The blood, sweat, and tears of so many good, honest people built this sacred place.”

Before I could ask another question, Benton flashed a tight smile. “Very nice to meet you, Nikki, I think quite highly of your uncle.” Then he clapped a hand on Dan’s shoulder and steered him away, speaking quickly and quietly.

Feeling most unwelcome, I pulled the office Canon out of its resting place and commenced documenting the scene. When Dan caught up with me again, he rattled off enough details to fill a dozen notebook pages: At least two pick-up trucks, possibly a third, and five sets of tennis shoe prints in the soft earth. Reported by a woman driving home from working a late shift, who spotted headlights bouncing through the cemetery. She pulled into the lot, flashed her brights, and they chased her back out onto the road.

“Age, city, workplace for the witness?” I asked brusquely.

“Twenty-nine, Northridge, no comment,” he replied.

“Why won’t you ID her workplace?” I asked, knowing the answer.

Dan shot me an exasperated look. “Well, that’s obvious,” he drawled sarcastically. “We want to protect her identity since the vandals nearly forced her off the road.”

I snapped my notebook shut. He might have been cute, but apparently, Dan Sullivan could be a bit of an asshole. “I asked so I didn’t have to make up an answer. I’ve been told that’s how journalism works.”

Without waiting for a response, I spun on my heel and stalked back to the Merc, spinning the tires for good measure as I sped away.

Before heading back to the office, I stopped by my room at the Viking Motel to clean up. The green, flat-roofed building sat just off a county road and attracted mostly

cheating couples and hookers who paid by the hour. The manager reserved a few “long-term rentals” for folks like me who couldn’t afford even the city’s cheapest apartments. My nose had not yet gone blind to the revolting mix of smoke, alcohol, and other even less savory human odors that wafted as I opened the door. After cleaning up and bandaging my knee, I changed into a blue, sleeveless sundress, slung a matching jacket over my shoulder and headed back out.

As I stood in Ernie’s office and recapped my adventure, he chuckled and shook his head, then wrapped a long arm around my shoulders and squeezed. I heard him sniff a few times.

“Nikki, I don’t mean to be rude, but did you fall into something?” he asked, taking a step sideways.

“I’m afraid that’s just me,” I replied softly. “Or, more accurately, the Viking Motel.”

Ernie’s eyes widened. “You’re staying in that rat hole?” I nodded and felt a blush of shame creep into my face. He leaned over and grabbed a set of keys that had been hanging on a tiny hook under the long window that overlooked our reception area. “The upstairs apartment ain’t much, but it’s furnished, there’s a washer/dryer, some dishes and pans in the cupboard. Rent is whatever you’re paying those crooks.”

A lump caught in my throat, and I blinked away grateful tears. Speechless, I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tight. He awkwardly patted my back, and I realized that I was embarrassing myself in front of my new co-workers.

As I pulled away, I said, “Thank you so much. I can’t wait to move in.”

“Finish the story first,” he deadpanned. “You’re still on the clock.”

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