



ABOVE THE FOLD

a Nikki Nielsen novel



by Joni Hubred



Chapter 1

I sometimes dream about that morning in mid-June, and it all comes back, the way everything looked and felt and sounded and smelled.

My eyes watered from the acrid stench of smoldering plastic and wood. Smoke billowed from a gaping hole at the front of a tall, proud concrete and glass behemoth that stretched across four acres of prime commercial property surrounded by deep stands of bushy pine trees. Firefighters whose first names and families I knew planted their boots on the slippery asphalt and manhandled hoses that sprayed curtains of water that hissed and steamed as they hit the charred remains. Emergency personnel of all stripes walked purposefully past me to their trucks, without looking up or saying hello.

A few feet away, my ex-husband lay dead under a stiff mound of black plastic. Someone would have to formally identify the body of Jeffrey Carlson. And since I was already there to cover the fire at FourSquare, Inc., Northridge, Minnesota's largest employer, I decided it might as well be me.

My name is Nikki Nielsen, and I own Northridge Press, the only newspaper in a small town full of people who have fallen in love with the Internet. Readership isn't what it was five years ago, but between print circulation and website traffic, we're still holding our own.

When Police Chief Dan Sullivan called to tell me about the fire, I thought about sending our only reporter, Susan Simmons. She's a crackerjack photographer, fair-to-middlin' writer, and had never actually met the victim. So letting her cover would have been the smart thing.

Instead, I raced out to my car and sped off, leaving my notebook and cell phone behind. No notes, no photos, no story. At some level, I believe now, that's exactly the way I wanted it.

"You don't have to do this," Dan said gently. His clear blue eyes caught and held mine, and a tiny wrinkle creased his broad forehead. He had twice offered to skip this formality. But I needed to see Jeff for myself. For our daughter.

"Let's just get this over with."

A stiff, cold breeze scattered ash and debris across the parking lot as our feet crunched across broken glass. Dan found a spot of dry pavement and knelt beside the body.

The dark plastic crackled as he turned it away from Jeff's soot-streaked face. I knew they suspected the fire had started with an explosive device that Jeff had probably carried to his office. Judging from the damage, Dan guessed that he had set the package on a table near a window, then turned away before it went off.

The face under the plastic didn't look much different from the one I'd fallen in love with twenty

years earlier. Thick, dark brown hair, parted right and tamed with a bit of gel. A heavy brow and patrician nose, thin, soft lips, square jaw and chin.

That was my Jeff.

I nodded and swallowed hard against an unexpected wave of nausea. I am not a squeamish woman. I've written about and photographed bloody crime scenes. It's apparently just different when the body is someone you know.

Dan yanked the shroud back into place, then gently touched my arm. "Come on, I've got a Thermos."

Five minutes later, he was leaning against the open door of his unmarked, blue Ford Crown Vic, running a long-fingered hand across the back of his black, brush-cut hair. I sat crosswise on the gray front seat, feet perched on the frame, sipping from a paper cup he'd fished from the back and picking bits of ash off my blue denim jeans. Steaming coffee fortified with a dash of Jack Daniels had calmed and settled my nerves and stomach.

I looked out across the parking lot, past the wreckage of FourSquare's front end, and watched a glorious pink-orange sunrise slowly merge into the deep blue sky. When we built FourSquare, I wanted a site with a view, land close to the water. This four-acre parcel had seemed like the perfect haven for the small printing and bulk mail business launched in our basement.

Jeff's prescience about the World Wide Web set on us on a global trajectory, and in the span of a year, our revenues climbed well into six figures. We made one temporary move before settling into the property on the outskirts of town, with plenty of room to expand and grow.

It took us two years to finish the complex, from the squat, glass-walled office wing to the last cinder block in Warehouse #2. Kelly practically grew up there. I could still see her barreling down the unpainted hallways, a wobbly hardhat balanced on the top of her head. When we worked late, she'd crawl up on the buttery soft, black leather couch in Jeff's office with a stack of books and her blankie, and read until she fell asleep.

After our bitter divorce and custody battle, Jeff Carlson would never, ever elicit another tear from me. But those memories, I cried for.

Dan cleared his throat. "Nik, do you have any idea --"

I shook my head and wiped my eyes as I interrupted. "Not a clue. Jeff had enemies, but I can't imagine any of them... They're business people, for God's sake."

"What about that company he just bought? Were there layoffs?"

"How the hell should I know?" I crushed the cup and tossed it toward the passenger side floor, as a knot of frustration began to form. "I stopped keeping up two years ago."

Dan remained perfectly calm and silent, which he knew would propel me in the opposite direction. The bastard was working me. I took a deep breath.

“Look, Jeff always made sure his business dealings made it into the dailies. Get yourself a subscription to the Strib.”

Jeff needled me by sending press releases to the Star Tribune and every other newspaper in the Twin Cities metropolitan area – except mine. So Dan probably sensed the bitterness in my voice.

Everyone within earshot probably sensed the bitterness in my voice.

“I thought you might have some insight about who hated him enough to do something like this.”

“Dan, you know as well as I do that Jeff was not the most well-liked person in town. He was arrogant, condescending, selfish, conceited, pushy. But I can’t imagine anyone hating him enough to kill him.”

Dan pushed his long, lean frame away from the vehicle and brushed dust from the side of his black uniform slacks. He held my gaze for a long time, then said, “You sure about that?”

And there it was. I don’t know why I expected Dan to just automatically exempt me from his list of suspects. Perhaps because we had shared a bed for nearly a year. Or because my daughter considered him one of her best friends in the whole world.

The journalist in me understood. The jilted girlfriend in me wanted to slap him. Hard.

“Why don’t you just ask me what I was doing between midnight and six a.m.? Wait, let me save you the bright lights. I was at home, asleep. Alone.”

As that last word echoed, I became aware people were watching. My voice had gotten much louder than I’d intended. Months of anger had drifted too close to the surface. I closed my eyes. More deep breathing. It seemed to help. “I didn’t kill him, Dan. I know nothing about bomb making, and even if I did, I’d have strapped it to his car, instead of risking my daughter’s future.”

“I had to ask.”

“Bullshit, Dan,” I snapped. “You don’t ‘have to’ anything, remember?”

The moment deserved a strong exit, but my knees were having none of it. Dan’s hand caught my arm as I stumbled.

“Nikki –”

I pulled away, muttered, “I’m fine,” and headed toward my red 1989 Mercury Cougar XR7, which is really too sporty for me but the only car on Bob Lowry’s lot that I could afford. I hunched deep into a poplin spring jacket that felt heavy on my shoulders and wished I had thrown a sweater over my t-shirt. A damp chill seeped in through the flannel lining and settled into my bones, but the sun had burned the fog off my windshield and a puff of warm air greeted me as I opened the car door.

Early spring in Minnesota is like this, still winter-grade cold but full of surprises. Robins perched on a snow fence. Tiny purple flowers breaking through the ice-rimmed soil. Rain, sleet, snow, sun, all on the same day.

It's probably what makes so many Minnesotans incurable optimists. No matter how bad the winter, how low the mercury, how high the snow, we remain absolutely certain spring will come, then summer and fall. The best three seasons last just long enough for us to complain about the mosquitoes and the humidity and the road construction, the never-ending yard work but at least we know the dark and cold always ends. Always.

I clung to that hope as I put the Merc in gear and headed south to tell my daughter her daddy wasn't ever coming home again.

Order Above the Fold at [createspace.com](https://www.createspace.com) or [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).