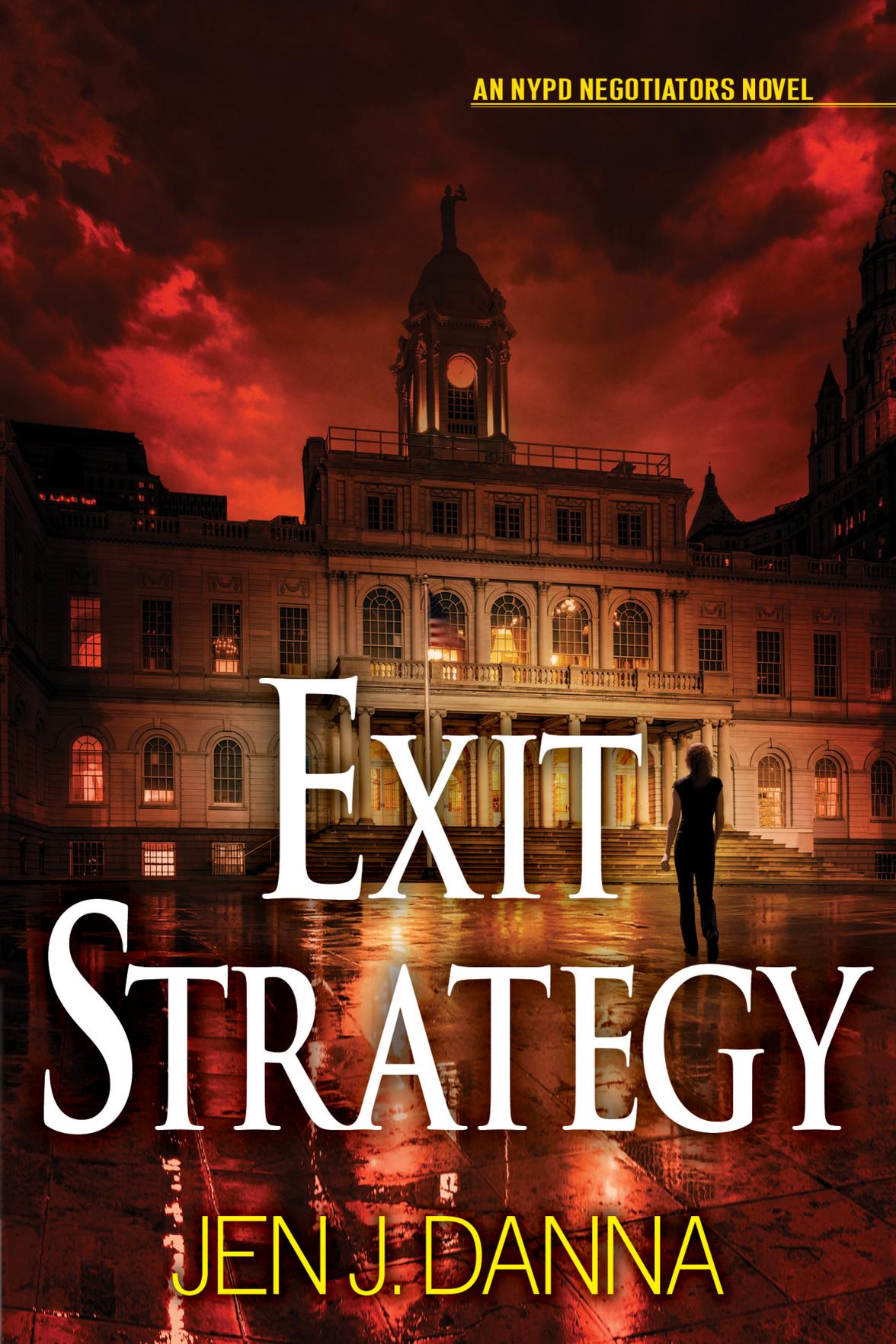


AN NYPD NEGOTIATORS NOVEL

A woman in a dark dress stands with her back to the camera, looking towards a grand, classical building at night. The building has a prominent dome and many windows, some of which are lit from within. The sky is a dramatic, deep red, suggesting a sunset or a fire. The ground is wet and reflects the lights from the building and the sky. The overall mood is mysterious and intense.

EXIT STRATEGY

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CHAPTER 1

“*H*ow’s your mom?”

“I swear she’s worse almost every time I see her.”

Gemma Capello studied her best friend with concern. She loved Frankie like a sister, and watching her mother’s illness eat away at her tore Gemma apart. “Did she know you?”

“She doesn’t know any of us anymore. She held on to Dad the longest—now he’s a stranger too. It’s killing him. It’s killing all of us, but mostly him.”

Gemma reached across the restaurant table to squeeze Frankie’s hand. “He’s a good man and they’ve been married for nearly forty years. His life as he knew it is over. It was already changing while she was in the house, but now she’s in hospice. . . .”

“He’s mourning her while she’s still alive because the inevitable is coming. He can’t stand to rattle around the apartment alone, so if he’s not with her at the hospice, he’s in the bakery working himself into the ground. I get tired just watching him.”

“And I get tired just watching *you*. Like father, like daughter.”

“I’m hardly doing that mu—”

“Francesca Russo, don’t give me that. Every time I’ve been in the bakery lately, it’s the two of you, shoulder to shoulder. You work just as many hours as he does, possibly more. You let him slip away to visit your mom knowing the bakery’s in good hands. You *are* doing that much. Now, tell me about your latest visit with her, so I’m up to speed when I stop by this week.”

“She’s slipping downhill. I think back to the days a few months ago when she was aggressive with the nurses because she was scared when she didn’t recognize people and places. Then she had life. Now she’s . . . not there.”

“Alzheimer’s is always hardest on loved ones. At this point, she’s probably unaware of her decline. Maybe that’s a blessing.”

“We’ve brought stuff in for her—her favorite perfume and blanket, a portable CD player and stacks of CDs, photos of the family—so her room feels like home.” Frankie’s voice caught on the last word. Bracing her elbows on the table and weaving her fingers together, she dropped her forehead onto her knuckles, her long blond hair falling forward to shade her face.

Gemma gave Frankie a moment to gather herself. Friends for as long as she could remember, they’d grown up together in the Little Italy neighborhood of Lower Manhattan, running in and out of each other’s kitchens on weekends with a familiarity that spoke of kinship. Both taking after their mothers, Gemma’s Sicilian brown eyes, olive complexion, and curly hair so unruly it never looked the same two days running complemented Frankie’s classic northern Italian fair skin, blue eyes, and blond waves. But sisters didn’t have to look alike to be two parts of a whole. They didn’t even need to belong to the same bloodline.

Frankie tipped her face up. “I’m such a killjoy. This is supposed to be a fun Saturday night out on the town at a swanky restaurant, and here I am bringing down the mood.”

“You’re not bringing down the mood. And I want to know everything. She’s my mother too, you know.”

Frankie’s mouth tightened, and she blinked furiously. “She always loved you like a daughter. Especially after . . .” Frankie pulled in a deep breath and shakily released it. Then she forced a laugh, brushing away moisture from the corner of her eye. “Okay, no more sadness. We’re going to have fun tonight, eat too much, splurge on dessert, and maybe even get a little tipsy.”

Gemma grinned at her. “That sounds perfect.”

Frankie picked up her menu, opened it with a flourish, and studied it intently.

Gemma opened her own menu and quickly decided on her meal. She let her gaze idly scan the tables around them. She loved the Fireball's rooftop patio—original to the 1919 landmark building. An arcade of paired Corinthian columns and brick arches surrounded it, opening the seating area to the sky as the towers of the city rose around them in glowing spears. The walls and pediments of original warm brick stood tall with fairy lights suspended between them, twinkling over the rows of tables below. The space between the heavy Corinthian columns was open, and only a short wrought iron fence topping a truncated brick wall separated diners from a lethal drop.

It had always amazed her that city inspectors allowed the design of the patio, but sometimes historical buildings found all the right loopholes in modern construction codes. To be honest, the open-air design was one of her favorite aspects of the restaurant's atmosphere. Seventeen stories down, the permeating noise of the city—from cars honking to the wail of sirens—was a muted echo of the street-level cacophony. High above it all, there was music piped through hidden speakers, the clink of glassware and dishes, the warm waft of summer's breeze, and the buzz of conversation. Perfect after a long week with even longer days on the horizon.

With a contented sigh, Gemma took another sip of her wine and relaxed against the woven seat back.

A baby's unhappy whimper caught at her, the sound jarring in the light babble of the surrounding crowd.

Near the entrance, a young woman stood with a tiny baby wrapped in a sling against her chest.

Tired. Pale. Dull eyes.

She remembered Rachel, her sister-in-law, in those first weeks following Nate's birth. No sleep, breast-feeding struggles, jaundice, and touches of postpartum depression. Even with the support of her family around her, she'd been a wreck.

This woman looked worse.

What is she doing in a late-night hot spot with a newborn?

Frankie closed her menu with a snap. "That was tough. Too many great choices, but I think I've decided. What about you?"

The woman started to weave through the tables.

Something is very wrong.

Her eyes stared almost sightlessly ahead.

Not just dull. Hopeless.

Instincts honed during fourteen years in the NYPD, with the last two in hostage negotiation, snapped the puzzle pieces into place, and Gemma's gaze swung to follow the woman's trajectory. She stood abruptly, her chair jerking back with a screech of legs scraping across the floor.

"Gem? Gem, what's wrong?" Her hands braced on the table-top, Frankie half rose out of her chair in alarm.

Gemma didn't take her eyes off the young woman. "Call 911."

"What? Why?"

"Tell them there's a murder-suicide attempt in progress." Gemma's voice was absolutely controlled. "Tell them a detective is on scene, but needs assistance." She didn't wait for Frankie to respond, but moved, pushing between the tables, trying to catch the woman who was still easily twenty-five feet away.

And only ten feet from one of the gaping archways. The brick base of the opening was three feet tall, but had a bench seat running along its length. The low wrought iron fence capping the brick was perhaps only eighteen inches high.

Step onto the bench seat, onto the bricks, over the fence. And fly.

"Ma'am? Ma'am, excuse me." Gemma's attempt to catch her attention was met with silence, so she raised her voice. "Ma'am. NYPD. I need you to stop."

It was like the woman was sleepwalking. She didn't pause; she didn't even slow down. She didn't turn to look. She had one goal, one intention.

The baby's whimpers morphed into a full cry.

The woman stepped up onto the bench seat, drawing the startled looks of diners around her and a few cries of "Hey! What are you doing?" Then she climbed over both brick and iron to stand on the small ledge on the far side, the warm summer breeze blow-

ing the ragged skeins of hair that escaped her ponytail around her face.

A man at the table directly behind her twisted around and clamped his hands around the young woman's ankle. She immediately struggled with him, pitching from side to side as she tried to break free.

"No, *stop!*" Gemma had her badge out of her pocket, extended to show her detective shield as she sprinted between the tables. "Sir, let her go!"

The man jerked back and the woman wrapped her hands around the pillar at her back. The baby let out a full-throated wail, its face turning beet red. A tiny fist pumped its way out of the sling.

The woman made no move to comfort her child, but stared straight ahead, as if scared to look down.

Seventeen stories. I'd be scared too.

But the woman's white-knuckled stranglehold on the pillar hinted at indecision.

Gemma still had a chance.

"*Dannazione.*" The Italian curse slid out under Gemma's breath. No help for it. She had to get up there. Not out on the ledge, but up closer to her. Close enough to make eye contact.

She jammed her shield in her pocket as she met the startled gaze of the man who had tried to stop the young mother. "Give me your hand."

He reflexively held it out.

She slapped her right hand into his and clamped down with a death grip. "Do *not* let go under any circumstances. Get help if need be. There's no time to bring in a safety harness." She braced one foot on the bench beside his hip as understanding dawned in his eyes. He gave a single sharp nod and gripped her hand tighter. On the far side, a woman grasped his arm as if to add her own weight as ballast.

Gemma stepped up onto the bench seat and then up another level to balance on the bricks just inside the wrought iron fence.

Only mere feet higher, the wind was stronger, blowing her hair into a mad tangle about her face. She didn't spare a glance for the deadly drop below, but turned to the desperate woman just out of reach. "Ma'am, I'm Detective Capello of the NYPD. Please don't go any farther."

Tired blue eyes flicked in her direction before moving away.

The baby continued to wail, the screams rising to an eardrum-vibrating pitch.

Gemma raised her voice to be heard clearly while still keeping her tone calm and soothing. "Ma'am, I'd like to talk to you. To help you. But we can't do it here. Please give me your hand and let's step down. Any problem you're having, we can work it out."

"There's no point."

The successful tactics of crisis negotiation were so ingrained, repeating the question to reinforce to the woman that she was being heard was an instantaneous response. "'There's no point'? Why do you think that?"

For the first time, the woman looked down. Gemma followed her gaze, down over vertical lines of windows, and what felt like miles of brick, concrete, and steel, to the dimness of light and sound below.

She was running out of time to make a connection. Normally, the longer a negotiation went, the more time was on the side of the negotiating team. But that didn't count when you were balanced on a ledge only a handful of inches wide above a seventeen-story death drop. She had only minutes, at most. "Ma'am, let's start with your name. Can you tell me that?"

"Joanna."

"Joanna, I can see you're at the end of your rope, but what you're doing is very dangerous. For you and your baby." Out of sight, Gemma gripped the man's hand harder and felt the answering hold in response. Her lieutenant would have her head for taking such a chance, but there was no time and no other way to get the woman back inside. Taking a deep breath, she extended her free hand. "I can help you, or I can find someone

who can. Take my hand. Come back in, talk to me about what's upset you."

"What's upset me?" Joanna's head whipped toward Gemma, even that small, isolated movement causing her to wobble slightly on the ledge.

But the life in her eyes gave Gemma hope. Joanna had just opened the door to a conversation that could save two lives. "Tell me about it." When the woman's lips folded into a tight white line, Gemma pushed on. "I'm a great listener. I might even know a little bit about what you're feeling."

"You have children?"

"No, but I'm an aunt several times over, and I've watched my sisters-in-law with their newborns. Those are tough days. I know you must be feeling stretched to the breaking point. How old is your baby?"

"Four weeks tomorrow." She took one hand off the pillar and slapped it over her ear. "And she won't stop screaming. I need her to stop screaming. I can't do anything to help her."

Gemma eyed the infant, trying to evaluate if there was any way to free her from the sling. *Wrapped too tight.* "That must be very distressing for you. You must feel useless, but it's not your fault."

"I'm her mother. If I can't help her, who can? Her father works shifts and can't be home all the time. I. Just. Need. To. Make. It. *Stop.*"

Her expression never changed, but Gemma's heart rate spiked at the slightly hysterical edge in Joanna's tone. This wasn't working. *Time to try a different tack.* "Haven't you thought about life with her? Watching her first steps? Dropping her off at her first day of kindergarten? Helping her find her feet in life with your guidance? A daughter needs her mother for that."

A scene streaked through her mind at her own words: *Huddled bodies, terrified eyes, screaming, a gunshot. Feeling utterly alone in the middle of the chaos.*

She pushed it away. *Focus.*

As if hearing Gemma's words, the infant's wail dissolved into a weak whimper punctuated by squeaky, gasping hiccups.

Joanna's hand dropped from her ear to reach behind her and scrabble for the pillar.

Gemma reached out farther, leaning far enough over the wrought iron railing to make her mouth go desert dry. "You feel alone and overwhelmed. Like nothing you do is right, and you're going to mess her up. Like some days you can hardly get out of bed. But this isn't the way. Don't you love your daughter?"

Joanna's eyes slid closed and a single tear broke from her lashes to trail down her pale cheek.

"Help me save her life. You brought her into this world, now keep her safe in it. You're not alone. There are many people who want to help you. Who *will* help you. You just have to reach out your hand. Trust me, Joanna. You both have so much to live for."

Joanna took a shaky breath and opened her eyes. Then she reached out with her left hand.

Gemma caught it in hers, feeling the tremor that wracked it.

How lost would you have to be to not only feel the need to take your own life, but that of your child as well?

Gemma prayed she'd never experience it.

"That's it, step slowly to your left. Slow. Careful. That's it. Just about there."

When Joanna stepped up to the railing, hands appeared from all around, closing over arms and clothing, coaxing her over the railing, and the two women in and back down to safety.

The young mother's knees buckled and Gemma went down to the floor with her, wrapping her arms around both woman and child as Joanna broke into sobs.

Gemma rubbed a hand up and down her back soothingly. "It's going to be all right. You're going to make it."

A hand squeezed her shoulder and Gemma looked up to find Frankie standing behind her.

"You're amazing," Frankie said, grinning. "My mother would be so proud of you."

The laugh that bubbled up was part joy, part overflowing nervous energy. Now that she was down and safe, Gemma shivered with a delayed adrenaline reaction.

The baby between them made a small noise and Gemma pulled back far enough to run a hand over the warm, downy head.

Two lives saved and a family brought back from the brink of devastation.

Not bad for a Saturday night out on the town.