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# The Tycoon's Desire

Anna DePalo  
Arlene James  
Chantelle Shaw

By Request

**Chantelle Shaw**

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**Anna DePalo**

**The Tycoon's Desire: Under  
the Tycoon's Protection /  
Tycoon Meets Texan! / The  
Greek Tycoon's Virgin Mistress**

**АННОТАЦИЯ**

Under The Tycoon's Protection Security tycoon Connor Rafferty was employed to safeguard prosecutor Allison Whittaker. Connor's barely restrained ardour should have been her warning not to take him into her home, mere footsteps from her bedroom. After all, he featured prominently in all her fantasies...Tycoon Meets Texan!Lucien Tyrone could have any woman he wanted, anytime, anywhere in the world. But the moment he met Avis Lorimer on a London-bound flight, he knew he'd met his match. She didn't need his money and she seemed hell-bent against needing a man. The woman was a mystery that he wanted to unravel...slowly, seductively.The Greek Tycoon's Virgin Mistress Supermodel Anneliese Christiansen seems to have it all, but Anna is an innocent and has reasons for resisting Damon Kouvaris's ruthless

seduction. That makes Anna a challenge, but will the Greek tycoon claim this virgin as his bride?

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*What would you risk for love?*

## **The Tycoon's Desire**

Three seductive and thrilling romances from three beloved Mills & Boon authors!

**The Tycoon's Desire**  
**Anna DePalo**  
**Arlene James**  
**Chantelle Shaw**



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# Under the Tycoon's Protection

By

**Anna DePalo**

A lifelong book lover, **ANNA DEPALO** discovered that she was a writer at heart when she realised that not everyone travels around with a full cast of characters in their head. She has lived in Italy and England, learned to speak French, graduated from Harvard, earned post-graduate degrees in political science and law, forgotten how to speak French and married her own dashing hero.

Anna has been an intellectual-property lawyer in New York. She loves travelling, reading, writing, old movies, chocolate and Italian (which she hasn't forgotten how to speak, thanks to her extended family). Readers can visit her at [www.annadepalo.com](http://www.annadepalo.com).

For my editor, Julie Barrett, and my friend Vera Scanlon, for knowing there's a place in the heart for fairy tales...and for understanding that strong heroines write their own tales.

# Chapter One

Allison Whittaker stared at the man who might be trying to kill her.

She shifted the slats of her window blinds slightly to get a better view of the dark Boston street stretched out below her. The yellowish glow cast by an old-fashioned gas lamp fought a losing battle with the darkness of the cool April night.

The man sat motionless in the driver's seat of the black car across the street, his face in shadow.

He'd been there last night, too.

She'd noticed. She made a point of noticing. More than four years as an Assistant District Attorney in Boston did that to a person. She'd been a lot more naive when she'd been straight out of law school.

A nice genteel white-shoe law-firm job should have been the next rung on the ladder. Her uppercrust family had certainly expected it of her. Her mother, a respected family court judge who'd just had a glowing article written about her in *The Boston Globe*, certainly had.

Instead, she'd surprised them all. She'd gone for the tough prosecutor's job. And not as a prestigious Assistant U.S. Attorney trying federal cases either.

Nope. She'd gone for the down-and-dirty: putting away the friendly neighborhood drug dealer or burglar as a prosecutor in

the District Attorney's Office.

She looked down again at the man in the car. Of course, she'd surprise everyone even more if she wound up dead in her apartment, her throat slashed by the mystery man sending her death threats. She didn't want to make that her encore.

She held her breath as the man in the car shifted and opened the driver's-side door.

As he got out of the car, she strained for a better view but couldn't make out his facial features in the dark. What she could tell was that he was tall and solidly built, with sandy-brown hair and dark clothes.

She watched as he scanned the street up and down and then made his way toward the house. Was he heading for her?

Her heart began to pound, her breath catching in her throat. *Call the police!* the rational part of her mind screamed.

Surely the neighbors would hear if he tried to break in? Her exclusive Beacon Hill neighborhood was usually quiet and serene.

The man below passed under a street lamp and her mind pulled the emergency brake on her thoughts.

*She knew that face.*

Suddenly fear was replaced by anger. Not the simmering variety of anger, either, but a full-blown boil. The type that any of her three older brothers would have recognized as a sign to dive for cover.

She headed for the staircase of the redbrick townhouse that she called home, heedless of the fact that she was dressed for bed

in a short silk slip and matching robe. When she got downstairs—the back of her mind taking note of the fact that she hadn't yet heard a knock or bell—she undid the lock on the front door and yanked the door open without ceremony.

“Hello, princess.”

Allison felt the same rush of energy she always did in this man's presence, quickly replaced by an undercurrent of pulsing tension.

He had a lithe but muscular physique, one which usually reduced women to giggles and flirtatious banter. But not her. They had too much of a history for that, and she doubted his presence on her doorstep tonight was a mere coincidence.

She crossed her arms and snapped, “Did you take a wrong turn, Connor? The last time I checked, Beacon Hill was too exclusive a neighborhood for riffraff like you.”

He had the audacity to look amused, his gaze raking her. “And you're still the perfect diamond blue blood, princess. Just like I remembered.”

“If you know anything about diamonds, you'll remember they're the hardest stones around.”

“Oh, I know plenty about diamonds these days, petunia,” he said, tapping the tip of her nose with his finger as he sauntered inside without invitation, forcing her to take a step back. “I've discovered they're the gift of choice for women in your class.”

She yanked her mind from the image of Connor picking out diamonds for his girlfriends. Probably at someplace like the

exclusive Van Cleef & Arpels, damn the man. He might have grown up in tough, working-class South Boston, but, thanks to the multimillion-dollar security business he'd started, his bank account was well into eight figures these days. He was quite the self-made tycoon.

She slammed the door shut behind him and locked it. "Make yourself at home." Sarcasm was easier than thinking about him looming in her dark house with no company but her and the turbulent feelings he unerringly evoked in her. "I'm sure you'll tell me in your own good time just what you were doing studying my house in the middle of the night."

"What makes you think I was studying anything?" He peeled off his jacket and tossed it onto a nearby chair.

She rubbed her chin, pretending to contemplate that as she followed him into the living room and watched him flick on a lamp. "Oh, I don't know...could it be the fact that you've been sitting in a car across the street with the engine turned off for the last half-hour?"

She watched as he glanced around the living room. Framed photographs were everywhere, including ones of her with family and friends and holding Samson, her cat who'd died of old age four months ago. She felt vulnerable and exposed, her life on display in so many telling snapshots.

She'd moved into the townhouse after selling her condo last year. Her best friend and sister-in-law, Liz, who was an interior designer, had helped her decorate in an elegant style that fit well

with the house's old and patrician history.

He turned back to her. "Nice digs." He bent down and gazed at a picture of her in a bikini on a beach in the Caribbean, laughing back into the camera as she ran with fins and goggles in her hands toward the water. "You filled out nicely, princess, once you finally got through puberty."

She gritted her teeth. Despite the fact that Connor Rafferty had practically become a member of the family since rooming with her oldest brother Quentin at Harvard, she'd never felt comfortable around him. And she'd certainly never thought of him as a brother. Impatiently, she asked, "Why are you here? And more importantly, why were you lurking outside my house so late on a Thursday night?"

He straightened and shoved his hands in his pockets, his jaw hardening. "Did I scare you? Did you think I was that piece of scum who's been sending you those nasty little love notes?"

"No!" She realized a second too late that the vehement denial sounded exactly like the bald-faced lie it was, but his mere presence had set her on edge. She supposed one of her brothers—probably Quentin—had mentioned to him the threats she'd been getting.

He quirked a brow, his tension easing a fraction. "What? Never thought you'd be glad to see me instead?" His lips twisted in wry amusement.

"Get real." In fact, she had been relieved it was him in the split second before anger had stepped in. "And you're evading

the question. What are you doing here?”

He walked over and leaned against the back of the chintz-covered couch, his legs stretched out in front of him, feet crossed. “Just doing my job.”

“Just—” She stopped as an unwelcome thought intruded and her eyes narrowed.

He cocked his head. “You were always a quick study, petunia. Though, I have to confess, it is fascinating to watch those wheels turn in that devious little head of yours. I’ve always said that if you’d been born a redhead, the package would have been perfect. Red hair to match that red-hot temper of yours.”

*“Get out.”*

She watched his eyes narrow and his lips set in a firm line. “Now is that any way to treat the guy who’s here to protect you?”

She strode into the room and whirled back toward him once she got to the fireplace. She couldn’t believe this was happening. “I don’t know which member of my family hired you, Connor—” she said, crossing her arms “—and, frankly, I don’t care. You may own the best security firm in the country, but you’re not wanted or needed here, got it?”

Pushing away from the couch, he folded his arms, looking as easy to move as a boulder up a mountain. “Based on what I’ve heard, I’d say I’m definitely needed around here. As to whether I’m wanted—” he shrugged “—I’ve been asked to do a job and it’s going to get done.”

*Want.* Her mind zeroed in on that one word, then quickly

backed away. Whatever she felt for Connor, *that* certainly wasn't an apt description.

True, with hazel eyes framed by long, thick lashes and sandy hair cut conservatively short, he was model material except for the nose that had been broken a couple of times and the crescent-shaped scar marring his chin. But in her mind that was all overshadowed by the fact that he was condescending and annoying. Not to mention an untrustworthy snitch.

She hadn't seen him since her brother Quentin's wedding a few months back, but though their paths hadn't crossed much lately, he was as familiar to her as a member of her family. He, on the other hand, hadn't really had family to speak of, having lost both parents by the time he'd gotten to Harvard. Instead, he'd spent most school holidays with the Whittakers.

She placed her hands on her hips. "There's no way you can do this job if I'm telling you that you *can't*."

He rubbed his chin, seeming to contemplate that for an instant. "Since Quentin still owns this place—" he nodded around him "—because you haven't gotten around to closing the deal with him yet to purchase it, I'd say you're wrong about that. So, first thing we're going to do is make sure that security at the bachelorette pad is up to snuff."

The familiar urge to throttle Connor Rafferty was coming over her again. True, she didn't own the townhouse, but that was a mere technicality. The house had stood empty for two years after Quentin had purchased it as an investment, but she'd fallen in

love with it and offered to buy it from him. In any case, she didn't need a bodyguard. "If I need protection, *I'll* get it."

His lips thinned, his gaze holding hers. "That won't be necessary, because I'm planning to stick to you like Krazy Glue until we get to the bottom of who's been sending you death threats in the mail and spray-painting obscenities on your Mercedes."

"I can take care of myself. I spotted you lurking around outside in a parked car, didn't I?"

The thin line of his lips curved upward in a humorless smile. "What about that guy who was in the parked car at the street corner? Don't tell me you missed him?"

She had.

He raised an eyebrow, seeming to read her silence for the admission it was.

"You can't be sure that was in any way connected to me." She knew she was right, nevertheless her heart tightened.

"You're right, I can't. But he was out of there like a speeding bullet as soon as I decided to test my theory by getting out of the car."

"And you didn't go after him?"

He shrugged. "How could I be sure he was after you?" he asked, tossing her words back at her.

At her impatient look, he added, "Anyway, it was too late to get back in the car to follow him and I couldn't make out his plate number or even the make of the car in the dark before he

disappeared. So, instead, I came to your door thinking at least I'd get thanked by the damsel in distress for running off the bad guy."

"Now that you've run him off, would you mind running off yourself?" Even if she needed protection, she could arrange for it herself. The last thing she needed was a bodyguard hired by her overprotective family, not to mention one as distracting and annoying as Connor was.

His brows drew together. "You really don't get it do you, princess?"

She pretended to look bored. "I suppose you're going to explain so I can 'get it.'" She stood her ground as he strode toward her. If he thought to intimidate her, he had another thing coming.

"You suppose right." He stopped mere inches away.

She had to tilt her chin up to keep eye contact with him and caught the muscle ticing in his jaw. She ought to take perverse satisfaction in knowing that, as much as he unsettled her, she seemed to have an uncanny ability to annoy him as well.

"Working for the DA's Office these days may give you the idea that you're streetwise," he growled, "but you're not." He looked her over. "Which leads me to wonder why you didn't stick with what all the other debutantes and society ladies do for public service? You know, organizing a charity auction or something. Why bother working with the tough guys at the DA's Office?"

She gritted her teeth and prayed for patience even though outrage bubbled up inside her. "This isn't a hobby. It's a career."

She knew he'd had a rough childhood on the sometimes unforgiving streets of South Boston, but, really, that didn't give him the right to constantly tweak her nose about having grown up with a silver spoon in her mouth. After all, he didn't play the wealth card with Quentin.

Connor's eyes narrowed. "You've made a career out of looking for a thrill, haven't you, petunia? I've wondered why that is and why you can't seem to get what you want with the pampered trust-fund boys over at the country club."

She glanced around for something to throw, then decided it would be a pity to waste some heirloom against his hard head. And, besides, she'd be playing into every preconception he had of her. "So sure you know it all, don't you? Except, guess what? I'm no longer some teenaged kid that you can rat out to her parents."

He looked at her assessingly, his hazel eyes darkened to a nearly amber color. She could tell from the flare of his nostrils that he had his temper on a very short leash. "Still can't forgive me for that one, can you?"

She arched a brow and ignored the way his nearness was coaxing every surface cell in her body into oversensitized awareness. "Don't flatter yourself."

He had the height advantage by a good six inches over her five-foot-eight frame, but she was used to holding her own against three brothers who similarly bested her. "Saying that I can't forgive you implies I still care about what happened, which I don't."

His lips thinned. “Yeah, and you haven’t seemed to have learned a lesson from it either.”

“Oh, I learned,” she countered. “I learned I couldn’t trust *you*.”

“You were a naive seventeen-year-old kid who’d started hanging out with the wrong crowd. What did you think? That biker boy in that bar was coming on to you because he wanted to take you home to share a root beer?”

“And you weren’t my keeper!” She didn’t add that one of the reasons she’d been in the bar that night was because she’d been hoping *he* would turn up. She’d briefly—very briefly—in her teenaged years had what some might have called an infatuation for Connor. But that was before he’d proven, by betraying her faith in him, that he’d seen her only as a pesky kid.

She could still recall the waves of embarrassment and humiliation she’d felt when he’d dumped her over his shoulder in the bar and marched out to his car, heedless of her kicking and yelling.

As if that weren’t enough, despite promising her that, if she kept still, he wouldn’t give a full report to her parents, he’d gone ahead and ratted her out anyway. She’d gotten a long lecture about underage drinking and sex, been grounded for a month, and had her comings and goings forever questioned after that.

Aloud, she said, “I’d say you’re just as guilty as I am, Connor, of not learning lessons from the past. You’re still acting like my keeper when you’re not.”

He finally seemed to be pushed over the edge. “Dammit! Are

you so stubborn that you won't accept help even when you need it? When your life may be in danger?"

"Stubborn?" She tilted her head to the side. "Seems to me you could write a magnum opus on that subject."

She started to brush past him but he grabbed her arms and forced her gaze to his. His expression was stormy, his brows drawn together and his lips compressed. "Stubborn, thickheaded..."

She braced her hands against his chest. "Likewise," she retorted. They were practically nose to nose, and beneath the adrenaline pumping through her veins, a little thrill of excitement intruded at having finally shaken his control—his *years-old* control.

His head swooped down then, cutting off her gasp of surprise as he seized her lips in an angry kiss. His lips moved over hers with hard pressure, and, when she would have jerked away, his hand came up to the back of her head to anchor her in place.

"Mmm...!"

Back when she'd been seventeen, she'd often daydreamed about what it would be like to be kissed by Connor Rafferty. But none of the scenarios had been like this. He kissed the way he did everything: with a cocky confidence that took no prisoners.

When he finally pulled away, their breathing was rapid as their eyes met. His hazel ones held a challenge, as if he was daring her to make some flippant comment about what he'd done and what invisible line had been crossed.

Her mouth opened, but when his gaze shot downward and narrowed, she clamped her lips together again. The tense moment stretched between them. She was acutely aware of how close he was, of the leashed energy emanating from him.

And then, without knowing exactly how and why it happened, she was in his arms again and his lips were on hers in an instant and she was responding the way she used to dream about, except now she could do a little real-life comparison.

His lips, for one thing, were softer and smoother than they looked. They slid over hers, molding and caressing, coaxing a response. His hands didn't roam, instead they exerted a subtle pressure between her shoulder blades and at the middle of her back.

He didn't make a sound, but focused all his concentration on giving and receiving pleasure from the stroke of his lips against hers. Whereas his first kiss had been angry, this one seduced.

Her lips parted beneath his and his tongue slid inside her mouth to stroke against hers, inviting her to respond. The evening shadow that darkened his jaw was a rough caress against her soft skin.

He pulled her closer, flush up against him, as she was caught up in the rush of feeling that had burst between them.

She might have been able to chalk up the first kiss as a fluke, but this second kiss...well, Connor Rafferty was the best kisser behind the best lips she'd ever encountered—and that included Ben Thayer in high school, who'd read and mastered *100 Creative*

*Kisses: Smooching with Confidence.*

When his hand slid down and cupped her bottom to pull them closer together so their bodies were in intimate contact, alarm bells went off in her head. She grasped his shoulders, intent on pushing him back, when she realized the ringing wasn't only in her head.

The phone rang again, insistently, and Connor set his hands on her shoulders to steady her as they broke apart.

Flustered, she glanced around the living room to determine where the ringing cordless was located.

She spotted it peeking from under a throw pillow on the couch and hesitantly picked it up. "Hello?" Her voice was still husky with arousal.

"I'm coming for you." The voice at the other end of the line was raspy and hoarse.

"Who is this?"

"Lay off your cases at the DA's Office or you'll end up dead."

Her hand tightened on the receiver. She knew she had to keep him talking to get more clues. "I don't scare easily."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Connor tense and his brows draw together. She turned away as he strode toward her.

There was a grim chuckle on the phone line. "I'm willing to bet Daddy would pay a nice little sum to get you back—dead or alive."

Suddenly, the receiver was torn from her hand. "Touch her and I'll obliterate you like the scum you are." Connor's voice was

clipped and deadly. “You won’t be able to walk down the street without watching your back.”

Allison guessed the line must have gone dead because Connor punched a few buttons on the receiver, listened for a few seconds, and then tossed the phone onto a chair with a disgusted look on his face. “Should have known it wouldn’t be that easy to trace.”

“Why did you do that?” she demanded, bracing her hands on her hips. “You didn’t even give me a chance to try to draw him out.”

“Draw him out?” he asked incredulously. “Forget it, honey. You may work for the DA, but take it from someone who’s had a lot more experience with criminals. This guy’s a wily bastard. He’s only going to be drawn out when he comes for your pretty little neck.”

“There’s no need to be crude,” she snapped.

“What did he say?” he demanded.

“He warned me to back off the legal cases I’m working on.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What else?”

Seeking a distraction, she adjusted a pillow on the couch. “And he implied that kidnapping was in the cards.” She didn’t add the part about a ransom to get her back—dead or alive. No use adding even more fuel to Connor’s bonfire.

## Chapter Two

Connor cursed. “I’m bunking down here.”

“What?”

“You heard me. My job starts now.” He cast a skeptical look at her tiny, chintz-covered couch. It looked about as comfortable as a linoleum floor. “I don’t suppose that couch converts into a sofa bed?”

“It doesn’t convert into anything. It’s an antique.”

He could almost hear her mentally add, “And if you’d grown up with some class, you would have known that.”

In his line of work, he’d become accustomed to spoiled, born-rich types who looked down their noses at him and the shadings of a Boston accent that still caused him to drop his *r*’s on occasion.

He’d long ago mentally filed Allison Whittaker under the heading Pampered Debutante. In return, she treated him with a haughty disdain that was so cool it could give polar bears frostbite.

True, he’d long ago sparked her ire by hauling her butt out of that rough-and-tumble bar, but he’d been fully justified. She’d been too much of a sheltered and naive princess to know what she was getting herself into.

When she’d announced after law school that she was joining the District Attorney’s Office, he’d figured she’d last about a

nanosecond. She'd surprised him by hanging on for four years, but he'd always thought—despite his taunt about her aversion to the country-club crowd—that it was only a matter of time before she threw in the towel to marry a guy named Sloan, or, God forbid, Blake, and raise little Ralph Lauren-clad infants in an upscale suburb.

He glanced at the clock on the mantel. Since she looked ready to argue with him again, he decided to change tactics. "It's nearly two in the morning. I'm beat and in no mood to drive back to my place. So, why don't you show some mercy here?"

He watched the fast-moving emotions on her face as she debated what to do. When she seemed to come to a conclusion, he knew he'd won, but he carefully schooled his features into a bland expression.

"Fine," she said reluctantly. "But only for tonight." She moved toward the doorway. "There's a guest bedroom. I'll just go up and make sure it's in shape."

As he watched her leave, he figured he'd deal with the morning when it arrived. Allison was in over her head here, and, whether she wanted to admit it or not, she needed him.

He moved around the room restlessly. He'd gotten a call that morning from Allison's brother Quentin. Naturally, all the Whittakers were concerned that Allison was being harassed and that it might be connected to one of her cases at the District Attorney's Office. But Allison—not being one to be cowed easily, a trait he normally would have admired—had insisted she

could handle matters by herself and no one should overreact.

His natural reaction had been to volunteer his security services. And, because Quentin was an old friend and the Whittakers had been good to him, he'd insisted on taking this matter on personally—with no fee.

He hadn't divulged *that* to Allison, of course. He figured it would be easier if she thought he was a hired hand rather than some quasi-big brother trying to step in and do the right thing.

And the truth of the matter was, whatever he felt these days, he was damn sure it wasn't brotherly. True, she drove him nuts, not the least because of her open disdain for him. But, as much as it irked him, they hit sparks off each other whenever they were in the same room.

He had enough sexual experience to recognize that for what it was. The signs were all there and too obvious to ignore. He was acutely aware of her—the light, flowery scent that clung to her skin, the startlingly brilliant blue of her eyes, the thick mass of dark-brown hair cascading past her shoulders.

She was curvy, too, her nicely rounded figure making her neither voluptuous nor willowy, but just right for making his body tighten whenever he was around her. He'd nearly blown a fuse when she'd opened the door in that short and silky slip, its matching robe gaping open above its loosely and obviously hastily tied belt.

He shoved his hands in his pockets. If he didn't watch it, he'd get aroused right now, just thinking about her, and he couldn't

afford another lapse.

The long-simmering kettle of tension between him and Allison was getting harder to ignore and living with her under the same roof was going to try his self-control to the limit.

He'd *kissed* her, for cripes' sake. Sure, he might try to rationalize it, but he knew the truth was more complicated than that.

What's more, she'd kissed him back. Now *that* was an interesting little reaction for him to puzzle over. She'd been all fiery passion, just as he'd thought she'd be, and he, Lord help him, had been more than ready to be consumed by the heat.

He wondered what would happen if he tried to kiss her again...He started to grin, then stopped short. *Get a grip, Rafferty. You're here to protect her.*

True, Allison had grown from a pesky kid into a beautiful, desirable woman. But they didn't get along well enough for anything longer than a fling, and anything shorter would feel as if he were betraying his friendship with the Whittakers. And that went a long way toward explaining why his attraction to Allison had lain dormant, never acted upon—until tonight.

So, protect her he would, his raging hormonal reaction to her be damned. Just thinking about someone trying to harm Ally had made his blood boil. She might send his libido into overdrive, but she also had some jerk trying to spook her.

Fortunately, he'd been able to persuade her to let him spend the night at her place. But bigger battles lay ahead. She thought

she was getting rid of him this morning, but she had another thing coming.

In the morning, Allison dressed for work and got downstairs only to discover Connor was already in the kitchen, dressed in last night's form-fitting black jeans and white T-shirt—which, to her chagrin, outlined the lean but hard-looking muscles of his chest.

He looked up from tossing a pancake and nodded toward the coffeemaker. "Help yourself."

She guessed she wasn't getting rid of him just yet. She didn't have it in her, however, to be irritated about it. "Thanks for making breakfast." The aroma of the coffee and the smell of pancakes were already seducing her taste buds.

His lips quirked up, as if in acknowledgement that her statement was dictated only by good manners. "You're welcome." He slid a pancake onto a waiting plate. "I never leave the house in the morning without a shot of carbs," he added, as if by way of explanation for his presence in her kitchen.

When they'd almost finished breakfast, she decided to tackle the bear in the room that they were both ignoring. "The threats are ridiculous. I mean, whoever is making them has to know that even if he gets me off my cases, they'll still go forward. The DA's Office will just get another prosecutor to handle them."

Connor took his time answering, wolfing down the last of his pancakes. "That's true. But no one knows your cases as well as you do. Whoever is threatening you is probably betting the

DA's case will be a lot weaker with a prosecutor who has been substituted midstream."

"But that's crazy!"

"Yup." Connor nodded. "Crazy and desperate."

Was he purposely trying to scare her?

As if reading skepticism on her face, he continued, "There've been plots in the past to knock off judges. A defendant may figure he can get a more sympathetic judge if he succeeds in getting rid of the first one." He shrugged. "It isn't a big leap to think someone's guessed a similar strategy could work with an overzealous Assistant DA."

She felt a prick of annoyance. "I'm not overzealous."

Connor leaned back in his chair. "Yeah, but you're doing your job too well and it's scaring this guy. When I called you overzealous, I was just conjecturing about what our Mr. Nice on the phone could be thinking—and what might be motivating him. Maybe the next Assistant DA won't care as much about your cases or won't have your determination and brains."

She couldn't help the frisson of happiness that went through her at his offhand compliment.

Connor leaned forward and shoved his empty plate aside. "Is there one case you've been working on a lot?"

She gave him a sardonic look. "I only wish there was just one." She knew she should be standing up right now, thanking him for his concern and showing him to the door, just as she'd promised last night. Yet, she supposed, she owed him some satisfaction in

return for his concern, however misplaced, not to mention for cooking breakfast.

“All right, what’s *a* major case you’re working on?”

She considered a moment, then said, “One of them is the Taylor burglary case.”

“That one hasn’t made the papers.”

She nodded. “It wouldn’t, but Sam Taylor has a rap sheet that’s long and interesting, including drug dealing and misdemeanor assault and battery. This time he’s charged with burglarizing a home.”

“Is he out on bail?”

“No, he’s behind bars awaiting trial.” Then she added, by way of explanation, “He’s only in his early twenties, so there’s still time for him to move on to more serious crimes even if he gets off for this one—or even if he doesn’t but gets out of prison in a few years.”

Connor nodded curtly. “Drug dealing. Was he a neighborhood pusher?”

“Basically.”

Connor drained his coffee cup, taking his time asking his next question. “Has anyone linked him with a gang? He’s the right age and corner-dealing is the bread-and-butter of gang business.”

His perceptiveness surprised her. “Some of his neighbors have more or less said so. Off the record.”

His face gave away nothing. “So, some gang members may be harassing the Assistant DA who’s trying to put their old buddy

Taylor in the slammer for a long while.”

A chill went through her as he gave voice to the fear that she refused to acknowledge, but she forced herself to nod in agreement. “All right, I buy that logic.”

“Any other prosecutions you’re handling?”

“There’s the Kendall case.”

“Okay, what’s the Kendall case?”

She shrugged. “Business executive accused of embezzlement. Part of it is what accountants know as a lapping scheme. Basically, stealing and then hiding the fact by applying subsequent revenue to cover the missing money in the company’s accounts receivable.” She paused. “At least that’s what we’re trying to prove.”

“Kendall. Name sounds familiar.”

She nodded. “He’s high profile. Sits on a bunch of charitable boards. A big social climber.”

His lips twisted. “Great, my favorite type.”

She pasted a look of mock surprise on her face. “What? You dislike the social climbers as much as the born-rich types? Are there any types you *do* like?”

He gave her an inscrutable look before mentally seeming to shift gears back to the issue at hand. “Those white-collar crimes often settle. Just the thought of landing in a cell next to your run-of-the-mill burglar or drug dealer is usually enough to get these guys’ defense attorneys to talk settlement.”

“True, but, in this case, Kendall doesn’t want to admit any

wrongdoing.” She was surprised by Connor’s knowledge of law enforcement. She supposed she really shouldn’t be though. His father had been a cop and Connor had in all likelihood worked with the police and prosecutors on numerous occasions on behalf of his clients.

She added, “As I said, Kendall is a social climber. If he’s convicted, it’ll ruin him. Right now his public relations firm is spinning this as the DA’s Office’s misguided attempt to bring down one of Boston’s big philanthropists.”

“Is Kendall out on bail?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, so Kendall is free to come and go. Unlike Taylor, who could, despite that, have some buddies on the outside helping him out. On the other hand, Kendall appears to be just a white-collar criminal. We don’t know whether he has it in him to get his hands dirty with death threats.”

She gave him a look of studied patience. “In other words, I’m working on two major cases, so I have two defendants with motives to do me wrong? Is that what you’re saying?”

He quirked a brow. “What I’m saying is, put a lid on it, petunia. Someone’s after you and we haven’t answered the who, what, and why questions yet. Until we do, it’s best if I stay here.”

Stay here? Hadn’t they settled this last night? *He was going, going, gone.* In fact, he should have been gone already. If she wasn’t such a sucker for coffee—not to mention pancakes for breakfast—she’d have seen him out the door an hour ago. In any

case, there were so many things wrong with his suggestion she couldn't begin to count them.

"You can't stay here." She added a note of finality to her tone.

"Can't?"

"It's not necessary." She added repressively, "I thought we'd settled this last night."

He glanced around in disgust. "Wake up, princess. You don't even have an alarm system around here."

"I'll have one put in."

He said dryly, "That's exactly why I was hired." Then added, "But putting in a security system takes time. Even a company like Rafferty Security needs a few days to do a job like this."

She should have seen this coming the minute she got downstairs to find him flipping pancakes. The sneak. "So, I'll stay with..." Who? She searched her brain in a hurry. Her parents? One of her brothers? The options weren't enticing. "My parents."

"Your parents live in Carlyle. That's going to be quite a commute." He folded his arms over his chest and sat back, apparently digging in for battle. "And, let's see..." He snapped his fingers. "Oh yeah, if I were a criminal trying to kidnap you, I'd absolutely love the chance to follow your car home from the office on a deserted road at one o'clock in the morning."

"One of my brothers then. Quentin, Matt and Noah all keep apartments in Boston."

"They're often not even *in* Boston. Ever since he got married, Quentin has settled down to domestic bliss in Carlyle with your

friend Liz and their baby. And Matt and Noah are often on the road for Whittaker Enterprises. If you disappeared from one of their apartments, no one would discover it for hours, even a day or two.”

She knew he was right, but she rebelled at the thought. No one, least of all her family, seemed to understand that a bodyguard would raise eyebrows at the DA’s Office. She’d worked too hard at her career to have her credibility undermined by the poor-littlerich-girl image that had stalked her her entire life.

Connor unfolded his arms. “What you need is a bodyguard,” he stated matter-of-factly. “But I understand why that might be a problem for someone in your position.”

“Thanks,” she said wryly, his perceptiveness taking her by surprise. “At least you’re more reasonable than my family.”

“So,” he went on, “that’s why I’m suggesting another option. Namely, me. All anybody else needs to know is that I’m a friend of the family who’s moved in with you for a while, maybe until renovations on my own place are done.”

The man had a stubborn streak a mile wide. Even if he did manage to keep a lower profile than a typical bodyguard, his offer was unwise. Very unwise if last night’s kiss was anything to judge by. “I thought we’d been over this. No.”

“I’ll pick you up and drop you off at work,” he continued unperturbed, “and, as an added bonus—” he gestured to their surroundings “—I’ll stay here with you.”

“How magnanimous of you.”

He gave her a humorless smile. “Don’t worry. I’m house-trained and basically pick up after myself.”

She rolled her eyes.

He leaned in then, suddenly serious, his hazel gaze capturing and holding hers. “This isn’t a game, Allison. Someone has already vandalized your car and sent you death threats. You don’t know what he’ll do next.”

“I know.” She’d tried not to focus on the danger but, instead, on finding the perpetrator. She refused to live her life in fear—although, truth be told, hadn’t that been part of her motivation last night for being at the window, peering down at a dark street?

Connor continued, “Your family said the police are involved, but you and I both know those resources only go so far.”

She’d always known Connor Rafferty was a man who didn’t take no for an answer. He was, after all, the guy who’d climbed out of South Boston and, by the age of thirty-seven, had built a multimillion-dollar enterprise offering security systems and personal protection to big companies as well as the rich and famous.

But, she reminded herself, he was also the guy who’d hauled her teenaged butt out of a dark bar over ten years ago. The guy who still acted at times as if she were a pesky little kid, regardless of last night’s inexplicable kiss.

Fortified by that thought, she tried again for a polite brush-off. “Look, Connor, I appreciate the offer, but, as you just said, the police are on it. The DA’s Office also has detectives assigned

to it.”

His eyes narrowed. “And what if I said you really don’t have a choice in the matter?”

She scoffed, then stopped abruptly as he reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a set of house keys. Alarm bells went off in her head. “Where did you get those?”

“When I’m hired for a job, I usually get access to the premises,” he said coolly.

She pursed her lips. She knew exactly which Whittaker to thank for giving him access. When she was through with Quentin, his ears would be ringing for days. In the meantime, she had one cagey security expert to deal with.

Quite clearly, she wasn’t simply going to be able to banish Connor as she’d like. Experience had taught her, however, that it was better to graciously call a temporary truce rather than to admit defeat. She needed time to figure out how to get him out of her house. In the meantime, she’d play along with his game.

“I see,” she said, keeping her voice a few degrees cooler than his. “Well, if you’re going to be my temporary roommate, then we should set some house rules.”

“Such as?” His tone was suspicious, wary.

“Last night was a mistake that will not happen again, got it? Unfortunately, you caught me at a weak moment, when my defenses were down.”

“That’s the idea.”

She narrowed her eyes. “As I said, it will not happen again.”

“Are we, by any chance, talking about the kiss we shared?”

“Of course I’m talking about the kiss.” Somewhere in the last few hours, the kiss—really two kisses that had seemed to flow almost seamlessly together—had assumed a singular identity all its own, so that she now referred to it mentally as “The Kiss.”

“Just checking,” he said in a voice that was so amiable it set her teeth on edge.

“And let me correct you, it’s not ‘the kiss we shared.’ It’s the kiss that you planted on me when I was distracted and vulnerable.”

His lips teased upward on one side. “Funny, you seemed to have enjoyed it.”

“No kissing. That’s part of the ground rules, Rafferty.”

He had the temerity to look openly amused. “I’ll agree not to kiss *you*. Whether you kiss me, however, is another matter.”

She gave him a frosty stare. “I’ll do my best to resist.”

“So, are we shacking up together?” he asked.

“With an offer like that, how can I refuse?”

He broke into a grin. “Modesty prevents me from saying more.”

“I’ve always said it’s your strong suit.”

“Is that sarcasm I detect?”

“That and good manners prevent me from saying what else.”

He laughed outright then, his eyes crinkling at the corners. Her stomach somersaulted and she resisted the sudden strange urge to quell his hilarity with a sultry kiss on his laughing mouth.

Oh boy, was she in trouble. Until last night, she'd have said that the only way she'd have thought to silence Connor was with an advanced move from her karate class.

At least until she could figure out how to get rid of him, Connor was going to be her protector from an unknown threat, but who was going to protect her from the very real threat he represented?

## Chapter Three

Connor's suspicions were immediately roused when Allison didn't argue about his insistence on driving her to work. His instincts told him she was far too docile. She was up to something, but he wasn't sure what.

Nevertheless, he didn't dwell on it because he had a typical jam-packed work day ahead of him, starting with driving back to his condo to change into a business suit before heading to Rafferty Security's headquarters.

At lunchtime, he drove over to Whittaker Enterprises' headquarters in Carlyle. He and Quentin had long ago scheduled lunch at Burke's Steakhouse for today. They tried to fit in a lunch appointment from time to time, often at Burke's, as a way of keeping in touch despite their busy schedules. He knew, however, that this time Quentin would have questions about how things were going with beefing up Allison's security.

He hadn't been wrong, he thought, as he shifted in the seat he'd taken in front of Quentin's desk because they still had a few minutes before they had to walk over to Burke's.

"I tried to talk to her about taking some more safety measures," Quentin was saying, "but she just shrugs me off. Tells me she's dealing with it. But, the thing is, she's in a high-profile job and coming into contact with unsavory types every day."

Connor nodded. "I'm doing my best. She wasn't exactly

thrilled to see me last night.” He added wryly, “And, you know, I’m not known for my ability to be charming and ingratiating.”

Quentin chuckled. “Yeah, but I haven’t got a choice...”

The door to the office swung open and Quentin’s voice trailed off as Allison strode in.

Her clear, sky-blue eyes flashed her annoyance. “Are you two discussing me, by chance?”

She was dressed in the navy suit that Connor had seen her in that morning, the open collar of her white shirt giving a tantalizing glimpse of her bare throat. Her high-heeled black leather pumps set off her shapely legs beneath her short skirt.

The mere sight of her awakened every male need Connor had, but she had completely disregarded everything he’d said this morning.

Quentin muttered a curse under his breath. “I suppose Celine let you come right in, didn’t she?”

“Actually, your secretary stepped away from her desk right after letting it slip that you were meeting with Connor.” Connor watched as Allison’s eyes settled on him then, a disdainful look on her face. “I might have known you’d be here. Patting yourself on the back for a mission accomplished, are you?”

He rose from his seat. “I’ll only feel a sense of accomplishment once we track down the guy who’s after you.” Sternly, he went on, “I thought I told you to stay put and that I’d pick you up from the office when you were ready to leave.”

“Yes, I do recall you ordering me to stay put. What I don’t

recall is my agreeing to it, especially since I have my dear sibling to thank for my new living arrangements.” She folded her arms and sat on the corner of Quentin’s desk, glancing back at her brother, who merely raised an eyebrow inquiringly at her.

“Hello, Quentin,” she said coolly. “Just the person I wanted to see. You know, the last time I checked, tenants still had the right to peaceful occupation of the premises without unwanted roommates being foisted on them.” She fixed her brother with a hard stare. “So far I’ve resisted the urge to file a complaint against you with landlord-tenant court. I know that would break Mom’s heart.”

“Is that what you came here to do? Complain?” He added in exasperation, “And, for the record, what would break Mom’s heart is if we found you dead in a ditch. We’re all worried sick about you and this psycho who’s sending you threats.”

“Well, of course Mom is worried!” Allison retorted. “She was also worried when Noah took up race-car driving a few years ago. When Matt decided he’d try rock-climbing. And, when *you* went backpacking through Europe. *But* she trusted you to take precautions.”

Quentin leaned forward. “What’s wrong with getting a little help in this case? I couldn’t even mention Connor’s name without you going ballistic on me.” Quentin folded his hands on his desk. “Connor is the best in the business. The only reason you won’t consider him is that you two do nothing but snap and bark at each other.”

“Great, won’t that make us pleasant roomies!”

Connor gained grim satisfaction from the thought that she sounded worried about their living situation. “I can stand the heat in the kitchen if you can, petunia.”

She gave him the imitation of a smile. “You won’t need to worry about the kitchen, Connor, because I plan to light a fire under you.”

Their gazes locked while Quentin stifled a laugh. Connor wondered what she’d say if he told her she’d already lit a fire inside him. He’d just been unsuccessfully dousing the flames for years.

Quentin cleared his throat. “If you think I’m meddling, Ally, just consider it payback for your meddling in my life. That was a nice little performance last year, orchestrating to throw me and Elizabeth together.”

“That was different.”

Quentin’s expression showed skepticism. “Oh, yeah?”

Connor knew that, partly thanks to Allison’s machinations, Quentin and her best friend Liz were now married and the parents of one-month-old Nicholas.

Allison straightened away from the desk that she had been leaning against and folded her arms. “You and Liz were made for each other, Quent. Besides, you can’t say you’re unhappy with the way things turned out.”

Quentin cocked his head and leaned back in his chair. “So that was different because you had my best interests at heart, is

that it?”

Connor nodded at Allison, then looked back at Quent. “Obviously, unlike Allison here, who had your best interests at heart, Quent, you’re just a dirty, rotten interloper of the first order.”

Allison sighed in exasperation. Her brother and Connor were cut from the same cloth, despite the fact that one had been born to wealth and the other still had the air of a dangerous bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks. Neither would back down in a situation like this.

Connor looked at her levelly. “Somehow I didn’t think you’d be backing down easily despite seeming docile as a lamb when I drove you to work this morning.”

“You do know me better than that,” she tossed back.

“Let’s call this one a draw, petunia.” He said it calmly, but his fixed look conveyed the message that he would not be thwarted next time.

“Why don’t you join us for lunch?” Quentin offered. “Connor and I agreed to do lunch today a long time ago, but, as it happens, you’ve been the number-one topic so far.”

She glanced at her watch. “Thanks for the offer but I need to get back.”

She’d succeeded in communicating her displeasure to her brother, but it was clear that neither he nor Connor was going to be moved to seeing her point of view—such as the need for Connor to remove himself from her house.

Since staying any longer would probably be an exercise in futility, she supposed that it made sense to agree to Connor's offer of a draw and retreat from the field of battle. But if Connor thought he'd won, he was in for a big surprise.

Connor moved toward her. "I'll go with you."

"You're having lunch with Quentin, remember? Besides, it's broad daylight with plenty of traffic."

"Quentin and I can have lunch another time," Connor shot back. "Besides, we've said all we needed to say. My guys are starting on the security system for the house this afternoon and I need to get back." He nodded at Quentin. "You don't mind if I take a rain check, do you?"

Quentin looked quizzically from one to the other of them before, she could swear, a smile played at the corners of his lips. "Not a problem. Not a problem at all."

Her brother's expression made her wary, but she didn't dwell on it as Connor came toward her, obviously intent on following her out the door. "Suit yourselves."

"I'll pick you up at work when you're done," Connor said in a tone that declared he would brook no argument. "Give me a ring on my cell."

"Naturally," she responded sarcastically, though silently she admitted that she'd unintentionally summarized part of the problem: she was afraid that having Connor around might seem all too natural all too quickly.

On Sunday, Allison drove to Carlyle to have brunch with her

family. Her brothers and her sister-in-law had all converged at her parents' impressive brick colonial.

Connor came with her, as she knew he would have even if he hadn't gotten a separate invitation from her parents.

He was still camped out at her townhouse, but she hadn't given up hope of dislodging him. Even if Quentin technically still owned the townhouse and Connor could claim to be acting at his request, that didn't mean she was without options. She wasn't prepared yet to take the drastic step of moving out herself, but she could refuse to cooperate with Connor and ignore him as much as possible.

The main topic of conversation during brunch was, of course, her nameless antagonist. In comparison, the fact that she was living with Connor seemingly went over without anyone so much as batting an eye.

Her mother seemed to summarize the general feeling by commenting, "We're so grateful to you, Connor, for providing your security services. It does give me some peace of mind."

Her brother Matt added, "Lots of luck, Connor. And, if I know Allison, you're going to need it."

Connor merely cocked an eyebrow but Quentin and Noah grinned knowingly.

Allison tossed a quelling look at her brothers—a glance that indicated their hilarity was definitely not appreciated.

By the time brunch was over and she joined her sister-in-law Elizabeth in the family room, she was gritting her teeth. If there

was anyone who could sympathize with her plight, however, it would be her best friend.

She flopped into a wicker chair facing Liz. “Can you believe it? Grateful? Peace of mind?” She opened her eyes wide in mock disbelief.

Liz, who’d just taken the rocking chair to breastfeed Nicholas, looked up. “I know, I know. But, Ally, really, aren’t you the least bit scared by all this?”

“You mean the threats?” Allison shrugged. “Yes, of course. But I can’t let fear paralyze me. Otherwise I might as well resign my job tomorrow.”

Liz nodded understandingly.

“But don’t tell my brothers that.” She blew a breath. “If they knew I was the least bit bothered by this, they’d probably hide me in a hut somewhere with bodyguards posted at all sides.”

Liz chuckled. “Oh, Allison, they mean well. Quentin, for one, is genuinely concerned about your safety.”

“I know. I just wish they’d give me a little more credit. Besides, there are practically four of them. Connor could give the other three a run for the money in the overprotectiveness category.”

Liz gave her a sympathetic look.

Allison sighed in exasperation. “Connor’s made himself at home in the townhouse. Yesterday he was inspecting door locks and checking windows. He already has his people installing a home alarm system with a direct alert to the police.”

The alarm system *had* made her more comfortable, she

conceded. It was just who was supervising the installation that bothered her.

“Hmm.” Liz looked down at the nursing baby. “There was a time when you would have done somersaults for attention from Connor.”

Allison made a noncommittal sound in her throat. Liz knew all about her teenaged humiliation at Connor’s hands. “I got tired of dining on the crumbs of that table a long time ago.”

“I’d be shocked if a daughter of mine were dining on the crumbs of *any* table,” Ava Whittaker said as she entered from the doorway leading to the family room.

Allison watched as her mother—looking elegant as always, her coifed hair as dark as Allison’s own but tinged with some gray—sank into a nearby wicker chair. “Mom, how could you say that in there?”

“Say what, dear?” Her mother bestowed an indulgent gaze on the baby.

Allison waved a hand. “*Grateful, Mom? Peace of mind?* Whatever happened to ‘a woman is perfectly capable of taking care of herself’? Usually I can count on *you* at least in this family.”

Her mother had practically raised her children alone while her father built Whittaker Enterprises. When the youngest of her children had reached her teens, Ava had gone to law school and eventually become a respected family court judge. Allison’s mother was her hero, her role model.

Her mother's gaze drifted back from the baby to her. "Of course I know you can take care of yourself. But there's nothing wrong with thanking Connor for his help when you may be in real danger." She paused. "In fact, I hope you haven't forgotten the manners I tried to instill in you and have already thanked him yourself. Have you?"

Allison quashed the niggle of guilt. Her mother had a sneaky way of turning the tables on her. "The way all of you were falling over yourselves to thank him, you'd think he'd taken on his worst client ever."

Her mother raised her eyebrows and smiled. "Allison, you know we meant nothing of the kind. Your brothers were just teasing, and usually you're besting them at their own game."

"Yes, well, think of the inconveniences that Connor has to put up with!" Allison sat up in her chair and pretended to think for a second before snapping her fingers. "I know! I made him pace downstairs waiting for me to get ready this morning." She glanced at Elizabeth, who was looking mildly amused. "You know how I *love* long, hot showers."

Her mother tried and failed to look as if she were seriously concerned.

Allison glanced from her mother to Liz and back. "Hasn't it occurred to anyone in this family that I'm, for all intents and purposes, *living with a man*?" She covered her mouth in a mock gasp, then threw up her hands. "I mean, if it had been anyone but Connor, your reaction would have been the opposite of peace

of mind and, guaranteed, Matt and Noah wouldn't have been wishing him luck."

"But it *is* Connor, dear." Ava paused. "Unless you're suggesting something *is* going on between the two of you?"

"Of course not!" The thought was ridiculous. "The Kiss" didn't count. "I was just arguing the what if? Is it so beyond the realm of possibility that Connor and I would find living together—" she searched for the right words, then gave up "—sexually awkward?" Not only that, it was too intimate, too personal, too everything!

A gleam came into her mother's eyes. "Oh, I see."

She knew that gleam. The last time her mother had it, she'd just found out Liz and Quentin were having a baby.

Frustrated, Allison slumped back into her chair in defeat. "No, you don't see, Mom."

She'd meant to use the co-habitation issue as a hook to gain some maternal support by making it clear why Connor living with her in the townhouse was an untenable situation. Unfortunately, the plan had backfired: her mother was looking pleasantly surprised.

"Well, what I do understand," Ava said, "is that there's a perfectly nice young man in there."

Allison stared moodily out at the lawn and wondered idly how Connor would have liked being called "a nice young man."

"And, if *someone* were interested, I'd say she couldn't do better."

Allison nodded at Liz. “Can you see her counting the grandbabies? You and Quentin have opened the floodgates.”

Liz righted the baby, who’d finished feeding. “Well, you have to admit, Connor is a catch.” She added, at Allison’s look, “If you were interested, I mean.”

“Speaking of grandbabies—” Ava took Nicholas from Liz and placed him over her shoulder to burp. “As much as I love this little sweetheart, my only regret is that Quentin and Liz didn’t have time to plan a formal wedding.” Ava stood up and started pacing, looking at Allison over the baby’s head. “So, my darling, I suggest you make sure to take those long, hot showers by yourself. Leave the cold ones to Connor.”

“Mom!”

Liz looked momentarily shocked and then started giggling.

Ava headed to the doorway, a smile on her face.

“We don’t even like each other!” Allison called to her mother’s retreating back. “We mix like oil and vinegar!”

She turned back to Liz. “Why am I explaining myself?”

“I think you’re protesting too much.”

She grabbed a pillow from a nearby chair and tossed it at Elizabeth, who laughed and ducked.

The next week was a blur for Allison. Connor had finished seeing to the security system installation at the townhouse, and she and Connor had settled into a regular routine. Each morning, no matter how early, she made it to the front door only to discover Connor was already waiting for her, car keys in hand. If she didn’t

call him at the end of the day, he'd phone her and ask when he needed to pick her up at the office.

She tried to dodge him on Wednesday, but he just showed up at her office anyway and waited a half-hour for her to finish working. She'd felt like a heel, no matter how much she told herself he deserved it for barging into her life and her house.

Yet, despite doing her best to treat him as if he were no more than a speck of dust on the wall, the two of them continued to rub up against each other. His papers and computer were set up in a corner of her study and his personal belongings were in her house.

But what really bothered her, she admitted to herself, was the intimacy of their living situation. She'd been trying to make a point to her mother when she'd used the words *sexually awkward*, but the truth wasn't far afield.

On Thursday morning, as she was getting ready for work, she'd realized the shirt for the outfit she was putting on was hanging in the hall closet. Knowing Connor was showering, she'd dashed out of her bedroom clad only in her bra and skirt.

She'd just turned to head back to her bedroom, pleased to have found the shirt she'd sought, when the bathroom door had unexpectedly opened and her gaze had collided with Connor's.

His only covering was a towel riding low on his hips. Half-naked, he paradoxically loomed even bigger and more imposing than he usually did.

Her gaze moved downward, taking in lean but sculpted

muscles and a line of hair that traveled down a flat stomach and disappeared from view at the top of his towel.

When her gaze connected with his again, she felt herself flush. But whether it was from embarrassment at being caught in her curiosity, or from his hot look at her nearly topless state, or both, she wasn't sure.

She'd involuntarily hugged the shirt to her breast in a protective gesture and marched past him, slamming her bedroom door shut behind her without turning around.

By Friday night, when Connor had picked her up at work and brought her back to the townhouse, the tension between them was so thick, she felt like a boiling pot with a shaking lid.

After changing out of her business suit and into some jeans and a fitted top, she headed downstairs to fix something simple for dinner and then curl up on the couch to go through some files she'd brought home with her from the office.

Unfortunately, Connor was downstairs in the front hall when she got there. He was loosening his tie and obviously headed upstairs to change out of the business suit he still wore. Somehow he managed to look rough around the edges even in conservative business attire.

He stopped when he saw her and his gaze raked over her, settling on the files she was holding. "What? No plans on a Friday night?"

She stiffened and her chin came up. "I have work to do." Then she added, even though she knew it was ridiculous to feel

defensive, “Otherwise I’d have had plans.”

“Since when does work mean giving up Friday nights?”

“Sometimes it does.” She shrugged. “Besides, I’m not in the mood to head out tonight.” That was partly true. She also wasn’t involved with anyone at the moment.

Normally, she’d be heading out anyway, but—and she’d rather eat chalk than admit this to Connor—the truth was that the death threats had nibbled at her self-confidence. So, spending Friday night cocooned at home—even with someone as annoying as Connor—was more appealing than hitting the social scene.

He arched a brow. “Maybe you’d feel differently about staying home if the guys you dated were more interesting.”

Her chin came up. “Back off, Rafferty.” As if he knew much more about her love life these days than what could be gleaned from the occasional mention about her in the society pages. She set her files down on the console table in the entry hall, where she could find them later.

He looked displeased. “You know what your problem is, petunia?”

She affected a bored tone. “I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“Damn straight, I’m going to tell you. Your problem is you can’t deal with a guy who has a brain in his head.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’ve watched you, princess. I’ve seen all the Tom, Dick, and Harrys that have gone trooping in and out of your life.”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “I’ve never dated a Tom,

a Dick—that's with a capital *D*—or a Harry.”

Connor's lips twisted. “Of course, I knew I didn't have a chance unless I surgically removed a large segment of my brain.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That's a lovely image. Anyway, it's not true. The guys I date are not dumb.”

“What about the guy who accidentally bonded his fingers together with glue?”

She sighed impatiently. “Why does everyone bring up Lenny? That was high school and I still can't live that one down.”

“In your book, the guys have to look and talk tough but be as thick as a plank,” Connor persisted. “Your problem is you've never dated a real man.”

“Like you, you mean?”

He smiled slowly, wolfishly. “I haven't heard any complaints.”

“You wouldn't. That criticism-proof room your ego dwells in doesn't let you hear any.”

His eyes narrowed. “Maybe there aren't any to be heard. I didn't hear any complaints from you about our kiss. In fact, you seemed to enjoy it.”

She flushed. “I've had better.”

His lips curved into a humorless smile, his jaw hardening. He moved closer. “Really?” he asked, his voice low and silky.

She lifted her chin up another notch. “Yes, *really*. And, for the record: I didn't enjoy that kiss.”

“Hmm.” He reached out and clasped her arms with his hands, drawing her closer, his hands moving up and down in a slow

caress. “Are you sure?” he murmured.

“Quite.”

“Because I could have sworn you were enjoying it.”

“Then you were wrong.” Was that breathy voice hers?

His gaze dropped to her mouth and he murmured, “Then I must have been imagining those soft lips moving underneath mine.”

He thought her lips were soft?

He bent his head and drew in a breath, turning his head to whisper in her ear, “And dreaming that subtle scent of pure woman.”

Her body heated.

He drew her flush up against him, his head bending to nuzzle her neck. “I must have fantasized that soft body pressed up against me...”

She should be stepping back—reminding him of the promise she’d extracted about no more kissing—but his low voice and the soothing caress of his hands were having an odd effect on her.

“Admit it,” he said softly against her temple. “You liked the kiss.” His hands continued to stroke her, coax her.

It was hard to issue a denial...and hard to remember why it was so important that she do so. His hands moved up to knead her shoulder blades and her eyes nearly closed.

She could feel the magnetism practically radiating from him. He lifted his head and his gaze connected with hers. His eyes shone with a golden-brownish hue in this light. She felt prickles

of awareness all over her skin, her nipples tight beneath the concealing fabric of her bra.

“You find me irresistible, don’t you, petunia?” he said in a low, seductive voice. “I’m an arrogant, heavy-handed monster, but you like it.”

Yes. She should say it out loud and put an end to this. She focused on his mouth. If she said yes, he’d probably kiss her again. She bent toward him—

—and he stepped back, his arms dropping to his sides and the twin flames disappearing from his eyes. “Lucky for us then that I can resist you.”

It took her a second, but comprehension finally hit and, with it, a cold fury.

He’d been toying with her! Of all the arrogant, smug...

She was tempted to rear back and punch him. He found her very resistible, did he? He’d enjoyed their kiss just as much as she had, the stinker.

And with that thought, she knew how to wipe the smug smile from his lips. She grasped his lapels and yanked him down to her.

In the instant before her eyes closed, she noted the surprise in his eyes followed by—and she knew she wasn’t wrong—male interest.

## Chapter Four

Her response caught him off guard.

But he'd be damned if he didn't take advantage of the opportunity she'd handed him.

Sure, he'd been trying to rile her. Sure, her refusal to admit their first kiss had affected her had challenged him to prove her wrong. But, the tension that had been building between them all week could almost be cut with the proverbial knife.

So, when one of her hands moved to grasp his shoulder while the other cupped the back of his head, he let her urge him forward and press herself into him as she slanted her mouth across his to deepen their kiss.

Her lips, he thought, were just as soft as he remembered. Enticing. And warm. Definitely warm as they moved over his, caressing, coaxing, rubbing.

He parted his lips and let her take the kiss deeper. His body tightened in instinctive reaction to her nearness.

No matter how much she denied it, the sexual attraction was almost palpable between them. So much so that there was a fine line between their constant baiting of one another and jumping into bed together.

He wrapped his arms around her, lifted her off her feet, and tilted his head back so her mouth was on top of his and she was pressed against him.

She made a sound and started to push away from him, but he tightened his arms around her and took her mouth again and again in a series of increasingly hot kisses that had his blood pounding through his veins.

Finally, when the urge to undress her and take her right there in the entryway started to overwhelm his common sense, he took two strides and had her up against the wall. He lowered her slowly, letting her slide down against him, from her breasts yielding against his chest to her thigh sliding against his arousal.

When her feet had reached the floor, he let her break their kiss.

She blinked and took deep breaths that seemed to mirror his own.

“Want to go another round, petunia?” His voice sounded husky with arousal to his own ears. “I dare you.”

He watched as her brows snapped together and her eyes flashed. It was worth the price of admission to spark her ire, he thought. She’d light into him now all right, but he’d gotten her to convert her outrage into sexual energy twice now, and both times he’d been putty in her hands.

“I don’t need another round, Rafferty.” Her lashes lowered and her hand came up to stroke his arousal. She looked back up at him, her lips curving seductively. “I have all the proof I need that—how did you put it?—you can resist me.”

He sucked in a breath. In an instant, he had her pressed up against the wall again, hands over her head and wrists cuffed by

one of his hands.

She wiggled against him, her seductive smile still in place, and he muttered a curse.

“What’s that, Connor? I didn’t hear you.”

He narrowed his eyes. They were playing a dangerous game, both of them refusing to back away from calling the other’s bluff. Yet, he was far from being the type to back away from a challenge. “Careful, princess. You might want to think twice about issuing a challenge like that when you’ve literally got your back to the wall,” he growled. “Do you want to deny again you enjoyed our lip-locks? Because, if you do, I’ll have to try to prove you wrong *again*.”

To her credit, her bravado didn’t desert her. She tossed her head, silky strands of dark hair sliding against them both as she tried to clear her face. “I suppose this counts as seduction to a caveman like you.”

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with his free hand. But then, instead of drawing his hand away, he gave in to temptation and slowly caressed the delicate line of her jaw, letting his thumb rub over the puffy softness of her lower lip.

She held herself still, her gaze locked on his, not yielding, but not lashing him with her sharp tongue either.

He moved his hand downward, stroking the side of her neck and then trailing the tip of his index finger down along the V-shaped neckline of her top and lower, over the roundness of her breast.

With his fingertip, he traced the shape of her breast, moving over its jutting peak.

Allison moaned.

“Watch me,” he breathed. He cupped her breast then—noting she was just large enough to fill the palm of his hand—and began to knead her softness.

Her eyes were fixed on his hand, the quickness of her breath the only sign she wasn’t immune to his caress.

His pulse came hard and heavy. “It wouldn’t take much for us to hit the sack together, petunia.”

She looked up at him, her eyes dilated and dark with arousal.

“Course,” he added wryly, “your brothers would probably pound me into pulp if we did. And I wouldn’t blame them.”

“It wouldn’t be any of their business,” she said, the breathless quality of her voice belying the toughness of her words.

He found it interesting she didn’t immediately deny any interest in sleeping with him. “Right. Ever the independent one, aren’t you?”

“It would be nice if you could remember that, too,” she said, her words sharp, but, again, her voice carrying that undertone of sexual excitement that was starting to drive him crazy.

“Have you ever wondered what it would be like, petunia,” he murmured, “if we took out our frustration with each other in the sack instead of aiming verbal barbs at each other?”

Her eyes widened a fraction but then her brows snapped together. Wrenching her hands free of his grip, she gave him a

push. When he took an involuntary step back, she brushed past him, only to turn back, arms folded, when she was free and clear.

She looked furious. “*Have I ever wondered?* Is that an invitation to your bed?”

“If it was, would you accept?”

“Not on your life, Rafferty.”

He didn’t know what had caused her abrupt change of mood, but he silently cursed himself for inadvertently setting it off.

She marched off in the direction of the living room. “Find some other entertainment for the evening.”

The next morning, Allison was feeling marginally more relaxed.

Any remnants of tension from last night she decided to work off at the gym. Connor came along, of course, and bench-pressed some iron while she hit the treadmill.

So much for her aim of ignoring him. *That* plan had fallen by the wayside last night. It didn’t help that, despite her best intentions, her eyes kept trailing to him, finding him behind her with the help of the mirror in front of her.

He was in superb physical condition. His biceps and chest muscles flexed as he lifted the weight above his head, held it, and lowered it again, unaware of her scrutiny.

She thought about those arms around her the night before and flushed. Then her mind went back to his words. *Had she ever wondered about hopping into bed with him?*

The question had been like a dousing with ice-cold water,

yanking her from the romantic haze she'd fallen into.

Of course, there'd been a time when she'd wondered what it would be like to spend the night with Connor. But his question not only made clear that he hadn't reciprocated her feelings, it had also shown how little he'd known her.

And, naturally, she also couldn't forget that he'd long ago proven himself an insensitive lout.

Another quick look in the mirror revealed Connor was attracting more than his fair share of surreptitious female attention.

Scowling, she ran harder.

Minutes later, she stepped off the treadmill and walked over to where he was now standing by the leg press machine. "I'm going for a swim in the pool."

He gave her a crooked grin. A thin sheen of sweat coated his arm muscles and neck and his T-shirt was darkened in the center with perspiration. He smelled sweaty and all male. "Need to cool off, princess?"

His double meaning wasn't lost on her. She gave him a level look. "Yes, and I thought a few laps in the pool would be a better approach than dumping water over your head."

His laugh sounded behind her as she moved off in the direction of the women's locker room for a quick duck under the shower nozzle before changing into her swimsuit. Since he'd gotten into this gym—not his usual one—with her guest pass, she doubted he'd be following her down to the pool.

She was wrong.

She'd completed three laps and stopped at the side of the pool when she looked up to find him standing above her. They were alone, she noticed peripherally, the middle-aged woman who had been swimming in a nearby lane just disappearing into the locker room.

She trod water and frowned up at him, cocking her head to the side. "I didn't think I'd see you down here." She nodded at his blue swim trunks. "Where did you get those?" she demanded.

"I always come prepared."

Was that amusement she saw lurking in his eyes? If she wasn't mistaken, he knew she'd been thinking—no, hoping—she'd managed to shake him.

Instead, he was looming above her, muscular legs planted near the side of the pool, his hands braced on his hips, his chest and forearms leanly corded and well defined.

Inwardly, she irritatedly shoved down the feminine urge to yield. Outwardly, she shrugged for his benefit. "Suit yourself," she said, and then took off toward the other end of the pool.

Within a few minutes, however, she became aware of him in the lane beside her. She pushed down her annoyance as he stayed with her down one length of the pool and up the other, matching her stroke for stroke.

She paused at the realization. Was that what he was? she thought. Her match? Is that why she found him so annoying?

She'd thrown her best at Connor over the years and he'd

thrown it right back at her. He didn't let her call the shots like a lot of the men she'd dated. Instead, he was an immovable, solid block of granite and she hadn't even made a dent despite years of trying.

Except, last night he'd wanted her. She imagined that if she hadn't made some flippant comment, if she'd taken his offer seriously, they'd have wound up in bed together.

She tested that thought despite herself. In bed with Connor Rafferty. In bed with her nemesis. In bed with the most detestably annoying and implacable man she knew.

Instinctively, she knew that their sleeping together would not be a tame affair. No, they'd take their contentious relationship into the bedroom and they'd be wild and uninhibited and a match of wills and passions.

She knew he found her at least somewhat attractive these days if their recent kisses were anything to go by. So why not just give in and scratch the itch they were both feeling?

She felt warm despite the coolness of the water. It would be so easy to go to bed with Connor—and so complicated—not least because he was currently living in the same house and sleeping just down the hall.

A part of her—the part that was apt to be flattered by evidence of her feminine power—was thrilled she'd finally gotten Connor's attention, even if it was over ten years too late. That part of her whispered, why not find out exactly what kind of lover he could be?

Still, Connor was Quentin's closest friend. He was so close to her family that Matt and Noah thought of him as an honorary brother. If she gave in to temptation, she might have to deal with seeing her old lover over a family dinner now and then for the rest of her life.

When she found herself touching the side of the pool again, she decided to stop and pull herself upright. Her gaze immediately connected with Connor's hazel one.

He was big and male and disturbingly close, beads of water clinging to his shoulders above the water line. "Nice swim, petunia. Is this how you keep in shape?"

"I enjoy a good swim now and then." She paused. "Alone."

He smiled. "Glad I've been let in on the secret ritual."

"Lucky me."

She swam away from him then and toward the ladder at the side of the pool. He swam after her and she was acutely aware of him watching her get herself out of the pool, water cascading from her body.

She grabbed a towel while he hauled himself out of the water, too. As she headed toward the locker room, he called after her, "Meet you outside in twenty minutes."

She shot him a baleful look over her shoulder. He was shadowing her in the most literal way possible and it was all extremely disturbing.

An hour later, Connor parked in front of the townhouse and followed Allison to her front door. The black metal mailbox

nailed to the brick face of the house was half open and visibly stuffed with catalogs and other mail.

He stepped around her before she could react and pulled out the mail in one swift move.

“Last time I checked,” she said, her tone annoyed, “it was a federal offense to interfere with the operation of the mail service.”

He smiled and watched her irritation grow. “Then consider it checking and not interfering.”

She made a grab for the mail, but he moved his arm up and away from her. “Aren’t you going to unlock the door?” he asked placidly.

“Don’t patronize me.”

“Just add it to my tab. I seem to be running a long one with you.”

She gave him a haughty look. “That’s funny, because I recall stopping your credit line a long time ago.”

“Open the door.” He nodded at the lock, then looked around. It was broad daylight, not even noon, but he didn’t like standing out here with her. They made an easy target. She hadn’t gotten any threats since he’d moved in with her, but he knew better than to let his guard down.

After she unlocked the door, he disengaged the alarm system by pressing a few buttons on the box near the door. Then he took a moment to glance through her mail.

The lingerie catalog gave him a moment’s pause as he

wondered whether she actually wore stuff similar to the skimpy satin bra and undies on the cover.

Tossing the catalog aside, he stopped at a legalized white envelope with no return address. He turned it over and, noticing nothing on the back, slid his finger under the flap to tear it open.

“That’s my mail!” Allison stormed back over to him from the table where she’d just set down her gym bag. “And don’t tell me that you open your clients’ mail, too!”

He blocked her attempt to grab the envelope. “In fact, sometimes I do. When the job calls for it.”

He slid the contents from the envelope and his blood ran cold. Allison gasped beside him.

There were three photographs of Allison going about her business. The photos were somewhat grainy, computer-generated reproductions taken from a distance, but nevertheless the subject was unmistakable.

Angling himself away from her, he let his eyes scan the contents of the plain white sheet of paper that had fallen out with the photos. The three lines of typed text chilled him:

Just so you know Im watchin. I can take you out anytime. If you wanna live, quit your job and go vacation on daddy’s money.

Allison made a grab for the material in his hand, but he held up his arm. “What is it?” she demanded.

He debated for a second, but realized he’d have no peace until she found out, as much as he wanted to shield her. He wanted to kill the bastard who was threatening her. Tipping the contents of

the envelope toward her, he said, "Take a look."

He watched her face blanch and cursed under his breath. "Don't touch anything. I'm calling the police and having them test all the contents of the envelope for fingerprints."

She nodded, uncharacteristically silent.

"Do you recognize when the photos were taken?"

"Two or three weeks ago, I think." She looked up at him and her expression conveyed thinly veiled distress. "That first shot was taken in front of the dry cleaners. My car is over on the far left, which is where I think I parked it when I couldn't find a closer spot. It looks as if the photo was taken from the parking lot across the street."

"Okay, and do you recognize the two others?"

"I think so. I'm wearing something different, but I think those were taken days apart."

He nodded and carefully set down the offending images and sheet of paper. "Good. That'll give the police a good lead about where to start asking questions to see if anyone remembers anything, though I doubt anyone will."

She raked a hand through her hair, the glossy locks cascading around her face. "This is ridiculous. I'm used to having my photo taken from time to time, but it's always been reporters flashing bulbs in my face at a press conference or at a charity ball."

He raised an eyebrow. "Quite the popular little heiress prosecutor, aren't we?"

"Kiss my millionaire fanny, Rafferty."

He laughed, but he privately admitted the joke was on him: he'd certainly given more than a passing thought to kissing her all over.

But, he was glad to see his comment had had its intended effect and there was some fire back in her eyes. That white-faced expression she'd been wearing was unlike her. And while he wanted her to appreciate the danger she could be in, he also didn't want this crazy nut to cow her and mark her for life.

She frowned. "His English skills aren't very good, are they?"

"Yeah, which does point to our man Taylor or, more precisely, one of his gang members who isn't behind bars."

"Hmm. Maybe." She looked unconvinced. "Or it could just be someone trying to throw us off the scent and point the finger elsewhere."

"What makes you think that?" He had his own theory in that regard, but he was interested in hearing hers.

She crossed her arms. "If one of Taylor's pals wanted me dead, I'd probably already be gone—or, at least, they wouldn't have bothered with a note."

He nodded. She'd obviously learned a few things at the DA's Office. He just wasn't sure he liked her being acquainted with the seedier side of life. Sure, he'd often made fun of her diamond-studded-slipper upbringing, but he knew better than most just how bad the alternative could be.

"The person who is doing this obviously wants to scare me," Allison mused, "but so far he's hung back from doing more than

threaten. So, again, we have a profile that might fit better with Kendall, who's a white-collar criminal."

"You know something, petunia?"

"What?" Her chin came up, as if expecting a sarcastic remark.

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

Her shoulders relaxed a little. "That's probably the highest compliment in your book."

## Chapter Five

Allison didn't know why she'd let Connor talk her into spending the weekend at his getaway cottage in the Berkshires, west of Boston. Somehow she'd let him convince her that she needed the change of scene.

She sat in the living room, her files around her, having spent the afternoon working on her brief in response to Kendall's attorney's pre-trial motion to exclude certain evidence from being presented to the jury.

She could hear Connor moving around in the kitchen. After they'd gone into town for groceries, he'd gone to work on his computer. There were four of them in the den, she had discovered, plus some hitech computer accessories.

She was thankful that the past week had been less eventful than last Saturday. After they'd discovered the anonymous note in her mailbox, the rest of the day had been spent talking to the police that Connor had summoned to the townhouse. She'd spent more than an hour being grilled, the dull throbbing at her temples a testimony to the thoroughness of their questioning.

The police had since informed them that the photographs and note hadn't turned up any fingerprints other than Connor's, though the envelope that they had come in had had many different prints, including probably that of her mailman. None of the shop owners or anyone else near the locations where

the photographs had been taken had remembered anything suspicious.

Yet, despite the uneventfulness of the week, she hadn't felt relaxed. Whereas before she'd only thought someone might be watching her, the photographs confirmed that to be the case.

It was a spooky and unsettlingly thought. She now found herself turning around at odd moments, expecting to catch someone watching her.

So, at the end of the week, when Connor had argued she could work just as well at his country house as she could at the townhouse, she hadn't disagreed too strenuously. In fact, she admitted to herself, having him around made her feel safe. Perhaps it was the photos and note that had done it, but she no longer had the same desire to get rid of him.

And going to Connor's place *was* a distraction. When they'd arrived that morning, she'd discovered that Connor's "getaway cottage" was a two-story, wood-frame structure nestled in the woods, well back from the road. It boasted four bedrooms, two baths, a spacious kitchen, a living room, dining room, den, deck and, for good measure, a hot tub.

She tried hard not to think about the hot tub—and tried harder still not to think about the fact that her bedroom was next to his.

She looked through the sliding-glass doors leading to the outdoor wooden deck and watched Connor fire up the barbecue grill. Beside him, plates held some steaks and potatoes, ready for grilling.

Deciding it was time to put away her files for the evening, she rose and gathered up her papers, putting them in a neat stack on an end table.

When she got outside, Connor was nursing a beer and watching the rays of the disappearing sun twinkle through the branches of the trees.

He opened another beer and handed it to her.

“Thanks,” she said, watching as he expertly used a long fork to turn the steaks. “You know, I could almost get used to having you cook for me, Rafferty.”

At his astonished look, she laughed. “But I suppose grilling is up there with manly pursuits like knowing how to open a beer bottle and programming a remote control.”

Seemingly despite himself, he chuckled. Closing the barbecue, he said, “You got that right, petunia. So for the rest of the evening, remember that I’m the one in charge and you’re the deputy.”

She rolled her eyes. “What do you mean for the rest of the evening? That’s what you try to convince me of every day.”

“Right, but with little success.” He nodded through the glass doors at the kitchen. “The rest of the stuff for dinner is in there.”

Tossing him a look, she nevertheless took the hint and went to the kitchen. She returned with plates, utensils, and napkins for the outdoor table. She also carried out the salad he’d left on the kitchen counter.

As she set the table, she cast him a surreptitious look. His

faded jeans did little to hide a tight rear end. He wore his button-down plaid shirt open at the collar, where it revealed a small bit of the white undershirt he wore beneath. Overall, the effect was casual but sexy.

Until they'd actually sat down to eat, Allison didn't realize how intimate it was to be having dinner alone with Connor, surrounded by the woods, eating food that he'd prepared. Despite that—or maybe as a distraction from it—the conversation flowed easily between them. They talked about the latest news, what the Boston Red Sox could do to make it to the World Series, and what qualified as classic rock-and-roll music.

As a result, by the time they were done eating, she was feeling pleasantly relaxed. So much so that she was able to say casually, “There’s one thing I never understood about you, Rafferty.”

“Only one?” He quirked a brow and sat back, looking amused. “What a letdown. I don’t even qualify as complex, misunderstood, or—better yet—tortured?”

She rolled her eyes. “James Dean was tortured, you’re just—” she paused to think for a few seconds “—inscrutable.”

“Inscrutable?” He rubbed his chin. “Okay, I guess that’s better than nothing. So, I suppose you’re going to enlighten me about what makes me ‘inscrutable?’”

Ignoring his mocking tone, she plunged ahead. “As I was saying, there’s one major thing I haven’t understood about you.” She took a fortifying sip of her beer. “It’s this whole South Boston business.”

His expression, she noted, became ever so slightly shuttered.

Nevertheless, because she wasn't one to turn back once she'd started, she went on, "You leave South Boston, get a fancy degree from Harvard—with high honors in computer science, no less—and then, instead of starting the corporate climb at some cushy investment banking job, you wind up going back to South Boston to set up shop."

He shrugged.

"Not only that," she persisted, "but you choose an unglamorous area like security systems. Most people don't go to Harvard just to come full circle."

He sat back in his chair and studied her. "True, but things worked out well anyway." He nodded around him to the large house and the surrounding trees. "Maybe, princess, it was all part of the master plan."

She nodded. "Knowing you, I don't doubt it. What I want to know is, what was the master plan?"

He looked amused. "You just keep probing until you get some answers, don't you? Which is probably what makes you a great prosecutor."

"Don't try to sidetrack me with compliments." She steeled herself against his flattery and leaned forward in her seat. "Why go back to South Boston after Harvard? One would assume you had every reason not to, particularly since your father was killed in the line of duty there."

She knew from Quentin that Connor's father had been a

cop who had died when Connor was still a kid. She also knew Connor's mother, a nurse, had died of breast cancer soon after his high-school graduation, leaving him parentless from the age of eighteen. It had all made her feel very sorry for Connor when she'd met him.

“Am I being cross-examined?” Connor's tone was casual, but she sensed an underlying tenseness in him.

Knowing that she was on to something, she ignored his question and said, instead, “Tell me about your father.” She added, gentling her voice, “Please. I'd really like to know.”

He saluted her with his empty beer bottle. “Okay, princess, I see I'm not going to throw you off.”

She wondered if that were true. She got the feeling he was only going to give her an answer because he wanted to—and she also sensed she was on terrain that Connor didn't ordinarily let people onto.

He was silent for a time, looking off into the distance before his gaze came back to her. “I was nine when Dad died. Tough age to lose your father—but no age is a good one. He was the assistant coach of my softball team and taught me the usual stuff: how to ride a bike, how to swim.”

He blew a breath, then continued, “My father had this thing about giving back to the community. Perhaps because he'd grown up as a working-class kid in South Boston himself and had gone on to become a cop.”

“Hmm,” was all she said. She'd finally gotten him going and

she wasn't going to give him the opportunity to get sidetracked by her commentary.

"Anyway, even though we could have afforded to live out in the suburbs, he wanted to stay in South Boston. He even angled his way to a job there."

"In other words, he was into 'community policing' even before the term was coined," she put in.

He nodded. "Exactly. He believed not only in police patrols, but police involvement in the community."

"Getting to know people," she supplied. "Coaching softball as a way to keep kids off the streets."

He nodded again. "Right."

She waited for him to go on.

He took a swig of his beer, then squinted into the distance as if he was trying to make out something among the trees. "One day the doorbell rang and I thought it was him, back from the evening shift. Instead it was the sergeant from his district, looking so serious I immediately got a queasy feeling in my stomach." He shifted his gaze back to hers. "You can guess what came next."

"How did it happen?" she asked softly. They'd known each other for years but this was the first time she'd felt comfortable enough to ask him about the circumstances of his father's death. She ached for the boy who had opened the door to a nightmare so many years ago.

"He was responding to a break-and-enter. He caught one guy, cuffed him. What he didn't know was the guy had a partner who

was packing a .38 special.”

Allison flinched at the image he evoked.

Connor grinned crookedly. “You wanted to know, princess.”

“What I want to know is why you bury that story.”

“Ever combative and feisty, aren’t you?”

She frowned. “Maybe, but there’s certainly nothing to be ashamed of in that story. I have no idea why you keep quiet about it. In fact—”

“In fact,” he finished for her, “people might have felt sorry for me and gone out of their way to help, is that what you were going to say?”

“Well, yes—”

“And that’s exactly what I didn’t want,” he said, his look almost combative. “That’s exactly how the people who did know—at my father’s precinct and in the neighborhood—did act.” His brows drew together. “I didn’t need their sympathy. It wasn’t going to bring my father back. And I sure as hell didn’t want anyone thinking I was trading on a tragedy.”

His words were startling. And, yet, they were in keeping with what she knew him to be: proud, tough, private.

“Curiosity satisfied, petunia?” he asked, rising with his empty plate. His tone wasn’t mocking, just matter-of-fact.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said simply, picking up her own plate and utensils and following him inside, where she deposited her load in the sink. “I can’t even imagine how hard it was for you and your mother.”

He leaned back against the kitchen counter, legs casually crossed at his feet. “Yeah, it was devastating for Mom. She went back into nursing to earn some money, but South Boston was all she knew, so that’s where we stayed.”

“You must have been lonely.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I was a terror. My father had been killed and I was mad as hell at the world. I fought, I skipped school and I took unnecessary risks. What finally turned me around was a combination of my mother and some well-meaning high-school teachers meting out tough love, and my own realization that I had a brain and I might as well use it in a way that got me somewhere.”

She went to perch on a bar stool. “Which brings me back to my original question. Why go back to South Boston after all that? You could have gone anywhere after Harvard, and you had every reason to.”

“Like I said, you’re tenacious.” He gave her a once-over with his eyes, then smiled at her scowl. “When I started my business, I was looking to keep overhead low. The neighborhood is changing, but the rent on a rinky-dink apartment in South Boston at the time was the right price. It was as simple as that.”

She nodded. Suddenly, turning down a cushy big law firm job for the DA’s Office while living in a townhouse in exclusive Beacon Hill didn’t seem like much of a sacrifice. “Every time I come across a profile of you in the newspapers or in magazines, they always mention that you headed back to South Boston to

start your business.”

He quirked a brow. “You read all the bios of me, princess?”

She felt herself grow red. “Just when the only alternative is reading the instructions on medicine bottles.”

He grinned. “You don’t give an inch do you?”

“You don’t either,” she retorted. “Anyway,” she said, going back to the subject at hand, “Rafferty Security still has an office in South Boston, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, you could say that...”

His hesitancy puzzled her. She knew her information wasn’t wrong and the question had almost been rhetorical. “Well, what else would you say?”

He coughed, then folded his arms.

“Yees?” she prompted. If she didn’t know better, she’d say he looked uncomfortable.

“It’s not really an office. It’s more like a community-relations clearinghouse.”

She frowned for a second, then laughed. “You mean you operate a charity there?”

He shifted. “That’s about right.”

The urge to tease was irresistible. “Don’t tell me the oh-so-tough Connor Rafferty has a soft spot. Or should I just call you Connor P.—for philanthropist—Rafferty?”

“We don’t call them philanthropists in South Boston, petunia.”

She cocked her head. “Oh, really? What do you call them, then? Benefactors? Charitable donors? People so rich they give

their money away?” She was so enjoying this. “Face it, Connor, you’re just like those well-heeled do-gooders you dislike. You know,” she said, throwing his words back at him, “like those debutantes who organize charity auctions.”

He acknowledged her teasing with a raised eyebrow but then shook his head. “I wasn’t born rich. There’s a difference.”

Rather than argue with him, she asked, “What does this charitable organization do? And, by the way—” she held up a hand “—while I’m enjoying this enormously because I like tweaking your nose about your closet philanthropy, I’m delighted you’ve seen fit to try to do good in the world.”

“This ‘charitable organization,’ as you put it, sponsors programs for neighborhood kids.”

“Very good.” She nodded. “I’m just surprised you’re not doing something more tied to Rafferty Security’s line of business.”

He looked surprised for a second.

“What?”

“We are. Good guess.” He added, “We offer self-defense classes and classes on home security.”

“Ah,” she said.

“I can see that light bulb going on in your head.”

“Well, it does explain a lot after all. Your father was into giving back to the community and you grow up and move back to South Boston and set up a charity. Not only that, but your father died thwarting a burglary and you go into the security business.”

He shoved away from the kitchen counter. “Connecting those

dots is easy, petunia. Just don't read too much into it. I don't."

"Why? Are you saying your father's death had nothing to do with it?" she persisted.

"What I'm saying is you ask too many questions," he grumbled. "But, yeah, I'll concede the influence."

Despite his casual tone, she knew she'd finally penetrated a bit below the facade that Connor Rafferty presented to the world. She'd also gained some insight into the source of Connor's protective instincts.

She really should give him some slack, she thought, even though she disliked the way he had come barging into her life. Having suffered one tragic loss, he was obviously protective of those close to him—and that protective instinct even extended to helping his former neighbors.

"What are you thinking, princess?" he asked. "I can almost see the wheels turning in that head of yours."

She gave her head a slight shake, her lips curving upward. "It's hard to believe, but I was feeling almost inclined to like you."

He stared at her intensely for a moment, then said, "You should smile more often."

Their eyes caught and held before she looked away, feeling suddenly uncharacteristically shy and awkward.

"What about you, petunia?" he said, leaning back against the kitchen counter and breaking the mood. "Your mother is a judge and you're a prosecutor. Seems to me you're just as guilty of some semi-conscious influences."

She relaxed as they seemed to be back on safer ground. “Psychoanalyze away,” she said lightly, “but you should know the analogy doesn’t work well. If I’d really wanted to make my family happy, I’d have stayed away from prosecuting criminals at the DA’s Office and gone to some nice, comfy law-firm job.” She wrinkled her nose. “You know, doing non-profit law or some such, which would have dovetailed nicely with all those charity auctions I’m supposed to be organizing.”

He grinned, seeming to recognize the jab at him and his comment the night he’d shown up at her townhouse. “All right,” he said, folding his arms, “maybe I was too quick to judge.”

She gave him a look of mock skepticism. “You think?”

Ignoring her bait, Connor realized it was time to turn the tables on her. She’d probed and poked and made him realize and acknowledge more than he’d wanted to. He figured he was entitled to reciprocate. “Why do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Work at the DA’s Office when you clearly don’t have to, and when you could have gotten a cushier job, which your family clearly expected you to do.”

She cocked her head to the side and contemplated him for a second, as if considering how much to divulge.

“Fess up, princess. You’re not the only one who knows how to be dogged with questions.” She looked deliciously delectable perched on the bar stool, her long legs encased in snug blue jeans, a cotton top outlining a pert and enticingly rounded chest.

“Would you believe me if I said a passion for justice?” she asked. “Before a late-life career in the law, my mother was the queen of those philanthropic charity benefits you’re so fond of. I guess some of that dogooder stuff rubbed off on me and my brothers.”

“And yet, your family wasn’t thrilled by your choice of the DA’s Office.” Connor forced himself to focus on what they were talking about despite the weight that had settled in his groin.

She looked down as if to shield her expression from him, stretching out her legs as she did so, one of the mules she was wearing dangling from her foot. “You may have noticed they’re rather protective.”

“No more so than with you, the baby of the family and the only girl,” he finished for her.

She looked up, her eyes meeting his. “Exactly.”

He smiled. “Well, you sure as heck didn’t make it easy on them. From what I recall, you did a good job of rattling the bars of the cage.”

She gave him a meaningful look. “You’d know something about that, wouldn’t you?”

He held up his hands in mock surrender. “Let’s make a deal to steer clear of that episode in the bar. I’ll admit it wasn’t one of my finer moments. I usually don’t deal in trickery.”

She looked somewhat mollified by his almost apology, but he couldn’t help adding, “Anyway, it’s not as if that night in the bar was out of character for you.”

“Oh?”

There was a wealth of meaning in that “oh” and, if he knew what was good for him, he should probably shut up now. Unfortunately, he was rarely one to shut up where Allison was concerned. “What about the year you started a campaign to get all the high-school girls to *accidentally on purpose* show up for class braless?” He grinned. “As I recall, it was the first time your school had to make a rule about underwear.”

“We were making a political statement!”

“Yeah, to the enjoyment of the male half of the student body,” he said dryly. He’d heard about the ensuing ruckus from Quentin.

“The point,” she said tightly, “was to show that if one girl wore a top without a bra one day, it was no big deal, but, if every girl went without a bra every day, it would be disruptive. In other words, we could wield a lot of power by joint action. After that, we were able to get some real change through the student council.”

“So is that what the DA’s Office is all about? Just more of your maverick tendencies?” he asked. “Or were you just trying to make your family crazy?”

“It’s debatable whether I drove them crazier than they drove me,” she muttered.

“Ah.”

“The DA’s Office is the first time I felt I had established an identity for myself apart from my family. I wasn’t Allison Whittaker, heiress, daughter of philanthropists James and Ava,

sister of Quentin the tycoon, Matt the enigma, Noah the playboy.”

“I see.”

“Do you really?” she asked. “At the DA’s Office, I was first and foremost Allison Whittaker, Assistant DA. Many of the defendants in my cases hadn’t even heard of the Whittakers. And, the other lawyers at the DA’s Office didn’t care what my last name was as long as I was pitching in with everyone else to help dig us out from under the mountain of cases.”

Her voice had risen half an octave and her words had started coming faster. He’d touched a nerve, that was for sure.

The DA’s Office had been a means to independence for Allison and he’d been making light of it. Suddenly he was sorry for that.

“Do you really understand, Connor?” she continued. “Because sometimes you seemed to act no better than my brothers.”

“Believe me, the last thing I feel for you is brotherly,” he said, half under his breath. Her impassioned speech had brought a spark to her eyes and a boldness to her body language that his libido was intuitively responding to.

“What?” she asked, although the arrested look on her face said she’d heard him.

“Did you not hear me, petunia?” he asked, meeting her eyes directly. “Or is it that you just can’t believe what you heard?”

All the reasons he’d given himself over the years not to test the waters with Allison flew out the window. In reality, he had

already tested the waters where she was concerned, and, now that he had had a taste of her, the need for more was irresistible.

She gave a laugh that sounded forced. “I imagine it was hard to feel brotherly when I was a thorn in your side.”

He pushed back from the counter. “Loss of courage isn’t something I’d ever have thought to accuse you of.”

They were alone in the woods together at the getaway cottage he’d recently finished building and where he’d brought no other woman. Suddenly, he didn’t give a damn about the consequences of getting romantically involved with her. All that mattered was now.

The threat she’d gotten in the mail, the proof that some nut had been watching her, waiting to strike, all that hammered home that he could have lost her already.

He might not have tomorrow—to laugh with her, to make love to her—and he’d be damned if he was going to wonder any longer about what might, could, or should have been.

She straightened on the stool, her brows drawing together. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?” he asked softly. With two strides, he was in front of her, within touching distance. To her credit, she stayed where she was, her chin coming up in that way she had when she was getting ready verbally to sock it to him.

He almost smiled as he reached out to touch her.

“Don’t,” she said on a breath. It wasn’t fear in her eyes—or panic—but a turbulent set of emotions.

“Why not?” The urge to touch her was overwhelming and there didn’t seem to be a reason in the world not to give in to it. “Because your brothers would beat me to a pulp?” He raised her chin, his thumb caressing her lower lip. “I think I’ll risk it,” he murmured.

## Chapter Six

Allison felt prickles of awareness all over her skin at Connor's touch. She knew if they slept together, nothing would be the same again.

This wasn't just about one kiss or one night. This was about getting tangled up with a man who wouldn't be as easy to handle as any of the ones she'd dated in the past. Connor would challenge her, and there'd be no smug assurance that she was in control.

When she still hadn't said anything, the light went out of Connor's eyes and his hand dropped away from her mouth. She hadn't voiced an invitation—and he hadn't read one in her eyes—so he was backing off.

In that instant, however, she knew she couldn't let this moment pass. He offered comfort and safety in a world that had become a much scarier place. And, while she knew she could always stand on her own two feet if she had to, she also knew that now—tonight—she wanted that comfort.

Suddenly, she couldn't wait to dive in to his arms. The possibility that she wouldn't be in control was more of a temptation than a risk to be avoided.

She slid off the stool, bringing them nearly flush up against each other.

His usual cocky facade was not on display. Instead, what she saw was raw hunger and naked desire.

Her breath caught in her throat. “Connor...”

She placed her hands on his chest and felt the strong, rhythmic beat of his heart. He held himself very still as she went up on tiptoe, searched his face, and then, slowly, very slowly, pressed her lips to his.

His mouth opened under the pressure of her lips, his lips rubbing, stroking against hers. He took his time—as if he had all the time in the world—letting her lead, then demanding more. Yet, he held his arms at his sides, his mouth the only part building a response from her.

Yes, she thought, the man definitely knew how to kiss.

Just when she was on the point of making sounds of frustration, however, he appeased her need and wrapped his arms around her.

The kiss deepened, his tongue slipping between her lips to swirl within her mouth and duel with hers.

She moaned and her fingers threaded through his hair. She couldn't get close enough to him—couldn't get enough of him.

When he finally tore his mouth from hers, he said huskily, “Wrap your legs around me.” She readily complied and his hands splayed across her bottom, supporting her weight.

In this position, his erection pressed into the most intimate part of her and, instinctively, she rubbed against him.

He muttered an oath as he headed for the stairs leading to the bedrooms. “Do that again and we won't make it to the bed.”

She laughed breathlessly. “What about the couch down here?”

He stopped for a second and gave her a smoldering look. “I want to see you lying in my bed. I want to see your thick, dark hair spread out across my pillow.” He leaned forward so his forehead rested against hers, then added, his voice deep, “I want to see you, I want to hear you and, most importantly, I want to taste you while you’re lying on my bed.”

“Is that an order?” she quipped.

He straightened and started up the stairs, hoisting her higher and giving her a wry grin. “No, but I hope I’ve answered your question. There *is* a couch down here, but *we* won’t be using it.”

“Can you hurry then?” she joked, almost hurting with the wanting. It seemed as if she’d been waiting for this moment forever and now need threatened to sweep her away.

At the end of the hallway upstairs, he kicked open the door to his bedroom and, in two strides, crossed the room to the bed, coming down half on top of her.

There was almost no thought then: need consumed them. They were like two people who had crossed the desert and finally come to a stream of water.

She was dimly aware of kicking off her sandals and of Connor helping her slide her top over her head. Then, with a flick of his fingers, he undid the front clasp of her bra.

“You’re perfect,” he groaned, his gaze hot on her breasts, which were capped by nipples that were tight and hard and peaked. Under his gaze, they became even more so.

“They’re just average breasts,” she muttered, embarrassed.

“Perfect,” he repeated in a low voice. Then, with his eyes never leaving hers, he slowly lowered his head to one breast. She sighed when his mouth closed around her nipple.

Waves of sensation threatened to take her under as she watched him use his mouth on her.

When he moved his mouth to her other breast, she threaded her fingers through his hair and let her eyes close. A restless longing had taken hold of her, making her limbs quiver and suffusing her with a liquid warmth.

His mouth left her breast and seized her lips and she wound her arms around his neck, meeting his questing mouth kiss for kiss until he finally pulled back with a groan and sat up.

She opened her eyes and nearly moaned in protest until she saw the desire written on his face. Raising herself on her elbows, she watched as he quickly rid himself of his plaid shirt and then yanked his white undershirt over his head.

His chest had only a sprinkling of hair, so there was little to conceal the muscles that defined his chest and upper arms.

She'd seen him shirtless several times over the years, when he'd come to pool parties at the Whittakers', and, memorably, when she'd spied him in the process of removing his sweat-stained shirt and putting on a fresh one during a school-break construction job in Carlyle.

She'd fantasized about touching him then. Now, she sat up to run her hands along the sculpted muscles.

“Yes, touch me,” he muttered. “Make me burn, petunia.”

She reveled in the power she had to affect him. She pressed her lips where her hands had been, placing hot, wet kisses over the planes of his chest.

He stopped her only so he could rid them both of their shoes and jeans. He peeled the denim off her in one fluid movement, taking along the underwear underneath.

His hand splayed on her hip as they fell back onto the bed again and their lips met in a deep, hungry kiss.

His hand caressed her leg, then moved to her inner thigh, making her tingle with anticipation.

She tore her mouth from his. “Ah, Connor...”

“Shh,” he said as his hand slid up to the juncture of her thighs. Holding her, his eyes steady on hers, his finger parted her and he caressed her inside.

“Oh!”

“Yes,” he said in a smoky voice. “Let me hear how it makes you feel, petunia.”

She clutched his shoulders, his look of possession the last thing she saw as her eyes closed and her world spiraled beyond everyday sensation in response to the sure and steady rhythm of his hand.

“Connor!” The cry was torn from her as she entered oblivion.

When Allison floated back down to earth, Connor was lying next to her, facing her, his arm bent and his head propped up on his hand. His other hand was drawing lazy circles on her thigh.

She looked down and he followed her gaze.

“Yup, I still want you,” he said, a hint of humor lacing his voice.

She looked back up at him. He was looking just a wee bit too pleased with himself, she decided. Giving him a coy look through her lashes, she said, “Well, thanks for everything,” and made to rise.

Laughing, he pushed her back onto the bed. “Not so fast, princess. I think we have some unfinished business.”

“Really?” She feigned innocence. “And that would be...?”

Instead of responding, he drew her to him, his mouth coming down on hers, and she was lost again in the sea of emotion and sensation between them.

He was the most magnificent man she'd ever been with. Connor's physical size made her feel small and dainty despite her statuesque five-foot-eight frame. His scent—the warm muskiness of all-male—enveloped her.

He kissed her deeply, hungrily, his mouth plundering. She opened her mouth to him even as he parted her legs, making room for himself.

She reached down then and grasped his erection, stroking him until he released her mouth with a growl. “I'm about to come out of my skin, petunia.”

“That's what I was hoping for,” she teased.

“You don't have to hope anymore,” he countered, then smiled so wolfishly he made her giggle.

He opened a drawer in the nightstand and retrieved a small

foil packet. Turning back to her, he cleared his throat and said, “Before you jump to conclusions, I’m going to tell you that you’re the only woman I’ve ever brought out here with me.”

She opened and shut her mouth.

“And secondly,” he went on, “I didn’t bring protection along because I was sure of myself. I just thought being prepared wouldn’t be a bad idea given the fireworks exploding between us lately.”

She felt ridiculously pleased about being the only woman he’d brought to his refuge in the Berkshires. She took the packet from him and, ignoring his surprised and then delighted look, rolled the protection slowly onto him.

“Ah, Allison,” he sighed.

She gave him a quick peck on the lips.

He spread her legs then and positioned himself. “Last chance, princess,” he said and, despite his light-hearted tone, she knew he was holding himself tightly in check.

In some ways, it seemed she’d been waiting for this moment her whole life. She’d be darned if she’d beat a retreat now—the consequences for tomorrow be damned. She was about to find out if the reality lived up to all her girlhood fantasies.

“Not a hope, Rafferty.” She wrapped her legs about him and raised her hips.

He groaned as he slid into her. “Ah, petunia—”

She gasped, then sighed.

He set a rhythm that she took up, meeting him with

counterpoint thrusts, the momentum building in tandem with the tension between them until it burst forth and sent her spiraling into a starry darkness, her hands clutching spasmodically on Connor's shoulders and feeling the thin sheen of sweat that had broken out on his skin.

Dimly, she heard him give a hoarse groan and take his own release.

Connor came back to reality slowly. He felt as if he'd been passed through a wringer; he was spent, his muscles weak with release. Paradoxically, he felt gloriously alive.

Before tonight, he'd thought the sexual tension between him and Allison was a strong sign they'd be explosive in bed together.

He hadn't been wrong.

He looked over at Allison. Her eyes were closed, their ebony lashes flickering against her fair skin. A slight smile played at the corners of her lips.

She'd blown him away. If he'd had any clue, he wondered whether he could have resisted her as long as he had, even with the many reasons it made sense to do so.

And that was the problem, he acknowledged. Those reasons had not gone away.

His job was to protect Allison, not bed her. She was still the daughter of the couple who'd treated him as if he were a surrogate son. She was Quentin's baby sister. Someone whom he, along with her brothers, had treated for years as if she were a spoiled brat.

He closed his eyes. He didn't—couldn't—regret what had just happened. It had been the most glorious sexual experience of his life. But what was he supposed to say to Quentin next time he saw him? *I slept with Allison and, hey, it was better than I ever fantasized?*

'Course, then he'd have to let Quentin deck him. He'd been asked to be her bodyguard, not her lover.

And yet, the attraction between him and Allison had been simmering for a long time. The threat against her had simply been the match that had ignited the tinderbox that they'd shoved their attraction into so they could safely ignore it.

He was going to have to tread carefully, that was for sure. Among other things, he had to figure out sooner rather than later who was making the death threats. After that, he could focus on figuring out what uncharted territory he and Allison had steered their relationship into.

He glanced back over at her sleeping face. Whether Allison was going to admit it or not, what they'd started tonight wasn't finished.

Allison woke to the smell of fresh coffee. Had she set the automatic timer on her coffee pot?

She rolled over and opened her eyes. Dark wood ceiling beams greeted her. She frowned, momentarily disoriented. Where was she?

And then it all came rushing back...the death threat in the mail...her agreement to come out to the Berkshires with Connor

despite her better judgment...their intimate dinner...the two of them tangling the sheets together.

She flushed. He'd certainly lived up to her fantasies and then some.

They'd woken up in the middle of the night, and they'd had at each other in a way that had been just a bit less mind-blowing than the first time.

More importantly, she knew that last night she'd seen a side of Connor that he rarely let anyone glimpse. She'd seen vulnerability when he'd talked about his father's death and she'd realized his protective instincts ran deep and strong.

Then he'd made love to her tenderly and passionately.

*Made love.* Was that literally what it had been?

Her mind shied away from the question.

Certainly he desired her. She hugged the sheet to her as she thought about Connor's demonstration of desire last night.

She had to admit their relationship had changed irrevocably.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs.

She groaned. Leave it to Connor not to give her a moment to freshen up and look presentable.

"Rise and shine, princess."

He was dressed in a beat-up T-shirt and jeans and his hair still appeared damp from his shower. He looked positively yummy.

A smile played at the corners of his lips. He held out the steaming cup in his hand. "I brought your shot of caffeine. I was going to hold it under your nose to resuscitate you, but I see

you're awake.”

She sprang up in bed and held out her hands. “Bless you.”

He handed her the cup and then sat on the side of the bed. “Cream, no sugar.”

She sipped. “Mmm. Excellent. How did you guess?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “There are a few things I've picked up about you over the years. One of them is how you like your coffee.”

“Part of your dossier on me?”

He looked at her enigmatically. “You could say that.”

“Hmm.” She lowered her eyes and sipped. “Thanks for bringing the coffee. It really wasn't necessary.”

She again felt the same uncharacteristic shyness with him that she'd felt last night, before...before...As she felt herself start to blush, she yanked her mind back from that trail of thought.

“Actually, it was necessary,” he said matter-of-factly.

She quirked a brow, struggling for the casual, uncaring attitude that had been so easy to adopt where he was concerned—before last night.

“I'll admit to a selfish desire to see how you looked lying in my bed this morning.”

She couldn't resist asking, “And how do I look?”

“Like a woman who's been thoroughly made love to.” His eyes were hot. “Just like I imagined.”

She felt herself heat. “You're crazy.”

He nodded. “Yep, crazy for you. Though I have to admit

jumping your bones last night was a good antidote for that. At least temporarily.”

Oh, boy. Somehow Connor’s new sexually tinged teasing was more dangerous than his old sarcastic tone.

“May need to inoculate myself every day though,” he mused, making a show of rubbing his chin in thought. “Strikes me as the kind of thing that wears off easily.”

She nearly choked on her coffee. Every day?

He looked amused as he caught her reaction. “Don’t worry, petunia. If last night was any measure, you’re more than up to the task. I guess it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that we’d be dynamite in bed together, given how we’re used to ripping into each other.”

“Hmm,” she said, shrugging as if he’d just told her nothing more significant than what the weather was outside, “I guess I should be flattered.”

He stood up, grinned. “Get dressed before I’m tempted to give you another demonstration of how flattered you should be.”

Allison cupped her chin in her hand and stared out at the rain from her kitchen window. She knew she probably had a dreamy, dopey expression on her face but it had been a week since they’d gotten back from the Berkshires and the week had been close to idyllic.

Her relationship with Connor had settled into a better routine, one tinged with tentative exploration. After Connor picked her up at the office, they usually cooked dinner together and then

worked or watched a movie. She was pleasantly surprised to discover Connor's skills in the kitchen extended to more than cooking pancakes and grilling.

"Necessity," he'd said with a grin. "Single guy living alone either cooks or goes hungry. After a while, it gets boring eating food straight from a can."

She'd made a face and he'd laughed out loud.

She'd also discovered that their taste in movies differed. He liked action-adventure flicks while she preferred romantic comedies, so they'd settled on legal dramas with a romantic subplot.

Their evenings had usually ended in her candlelit, floral-scented bedroom with its pointelle-blanket-covered brass bed. It had been amusing to watch Connor invade such a wildly feminine room and she'd laughed as he'd gingerly settled in.

Despite the threats looming over her head, the past week had left her with a feeling of contentment and sense of well-being she'd never experienced before.

She knew she was in danger of falling in love with Connor. Rather than feel alarm, however, she felt joyously happy.

There was no doubt that Connor wanted her. Her face heated as she recalled how many different ways he'd demonstrated that. And—as she'd once told her sister-in-law Elizabeth when she'd thought she'd been having trouble with Quentin—want was often the road to love.

If Connor didn't love her yet, he nevertheless could come to

realize he had deeper feelings for her. Especially if the future was anything like the past week.

She glanced up at the late-Saturday sky again. The rain hadn't let up and Connor still hadn't returned from his business meeting. She'd been expecting him an hour ago so they could run some errands, the most important of which was to pick up some more groceries.

She'd been planning all day for a candlelit dinner. Just the two of them, clinking wineglasses, tasting her pear salad, and then dining on a meal of pheasant with pecan stuffing, creamed spinach, and roasted tomatoes.

The salad was in the refrigerator, the ingredients for the creamed spinach ready to be combined on the stove top, and the pheasant and tomatoes prepared and ready to slide into the oven as soon as Connor got back.

She looked at her watch. Six-thirty. Where was he? His meeting with out-of-town clients must be running late.

She wondered whether she had time to run out before he got back. Most of the groceries she needed could wait for tomorrow, but she'd discovered an hour ago that she was a few ingredients short for the pie she'd been planning to make for dessert.

She glanced at her watch again and bit her lip. She could dash out to the supermarket and be back in no time. Connor wouldn't even have to know.

Her mind made up, she grabbed a sheet of paper and scribbled a note just in case Connor got back before she did: "Out to the

supermarket. Back soon.” She used tape to attach the note to the mirror by the front door, then grabbed her purse.

As she’d thought, it took her no time at all to get to the supermarket and through the check-out line. The rain meant the store was more empty than usual.

When she got outside again, the rain had stopped, but the overcast sky and fog made everything look dreary and dark.

She started across the parking lot to her car, juggling her two bags and purse.

Spotting her car, she noticed again that the new paint job—which had cost a mint—had fortunately covered up the graffiti that had been spray-painted several weeks ago.

Something looked strange however. Drawing closer, she realized the back of the car was tilting downward.

Darn. Had she gotten a flat?

Dropping her bags on the ground, she walked between her car and the one parked next to it and bent to inspect her back tire.

A clean slice through the rubber.

Her heart began to thud.

Someone had slashed her tire.

She heard a car coming toward her and automatically straightened up.

A gunshot sounded, followed quickly by another. She ducked just as the windshield of her car cracked and splintered.

Her mind raced frantically as she tried to figure a way out of the situation. Whoever had fired the bullets had sped past her,

but that didn't mean he wouldn't be turning his car around for another pass.

She straightened up a little, risking a glance over her car to try to get a look at the color and model of car that the gunman was driving, but didn't see anything.

"Help! Someone call the police!" she screamed even as she dug into her purse for her cell phone.

At the sound of feet pounding the pavement, she crouched down.

"Allison! For God's sake, stay down!"

It was Connor's voice shouting to her as he seemed to run past, even as she heard a car speed out of the parking lot with a shriek of tires.

"Dammit!" Connor said.

He cursed some more as Allison heard him coming back toward her.

She straightened, pushing her hair out of her face, and stepped from between the parked cars.

"I tried to get a shot at him, but he was too far away," Connor said, breathing heavily.

Her eyes shot downward and she gaped as she noticed the gun that Connor grasped in his hand. Where had *that* come from?

When her gaze moved upward again, she focused for the first time on the expression on Connor's face.

He looked mad as hell.

## Chapter Seven

While they drove back to the townhouse, Connor kept a grip on his temper. But only because he had to.

They'd just finished talking to the police, who'd recovered a couple of unusual-looking bullets—or slugs, in police lingo—from the scene around the parking lot. With any luck, the police would have a theory soon on the caliber and model of gun that the perpetrator had probably used in the shooting.

Unfortunately, the parking lot—at least the part around Allison's car—had been empty of people at the time of the shooting, probably due in no small part to the bad weather. Of the two people whom the police had interviewed who had seen the perp's car speed away, one had sworn the car was gray while the other had called it blue.

In any case, Connor doubted that the gunman was stupid enough to use a vehicle with plates that could be easily traced back to him, though he'd make sure that the police and his own people nevertheless looked into it.

And that was the other thing: the profile of Allison's unknown harasser that he and Allison had constructed could be thrown out the window.

The assailant had now done more than merely threaten and vandalize property. He'd shown he was desperate enough to try a direct attack on Allison. Not only that, but, chillingly, he'd

apparently slashed Allison's tire before the shooting in order to make it hard for her to flee by car.

Still, Connor wasn't convinced that the signs pointed to a member of Taylor's gang rather than a white-collar criminal such as Kendall. Allison's assailant had proved—fortunately—not to have very good aim. While it was possible that the incident in the parking lot had been intended as a gang-inspired drive-by shooting, the fact that the job had been so botched raised questions in Connor's mind.

The minute he'd gotten back to the townhouse and found the note Allison had left behind, he'd taken off after her, trying to reach her on her cell phone and not succeeding. When he'd gotten to the parking lot, he'd pulled up right at the curb in front of the supermarket. He'd been getting out of his car when he'd heard the first shot ring out. Icy fear had wrapped itself around his heart as he'd reached for his own gun.

He gave a quick glance at Allison sitting in the passenger seat next to him. She sat looking straight ahead, still appearing shaken by what had transpired in the last couple of hours.

Silence reigned between them until they got into the townhouse. At which point, Connor decided it was time to get some answers. "I have a distinct memory of telling you to stay put," he said tightly. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but running out to the supermarket does not count as staying put."

"You were delayed," she responded, irritation lacing her voice. "And, anyway, I refuse to be a prisoner in my own home."

“Right,” he said harshly as he followed her into the living room. “It appears you’d rather be dead.”

She stopped and whirled back to face him, temper flaring in her eyes. “That’s blunt,” she fired back. “Anyway, even if you’d been with me, I might still have gotten shot at.”

“True, but it’s all about the odds, princess, and it would have been less likely,” he snarled back. “He, or whoever it was who took a shot at you, would have thought twice about it if you looked as if you had security.”

“Since when do you carry a gun?” she demanded abruptly.

“What do you think being in the security business means, petunia?” he said, his tone scornful. “Of course I’ve got a gun.”

He didn’t add that he was considered an excellent shot, keeping his skills honed at a shooting range. His clients expected him to provide top-notch security and that included using a gun if necessary. Fortunately, it had never been necessary—until today—because he was adept at using other means to get results.

“And I can’t believe you chased that nut,” she continued. “You could have been killed!”

Worried about him, was she? Under different circumstances, he’d have been pleased, but right now he was still furious about the way she’d completely disregarded his instructions. “So why did you run out?” he asked. “What was so important you couldn’t wait for me to get back? Or give me a call on my cell, for God’s sake?”

She went still, looking away, then glancing back.

She appeared embarrassed, though that didn't make sense. "What?"

"I was planning a romantic dinner," she said finally. "For two. I needed some ingredients."

Her admission floored him. That was it? That was the important errand she'd told the police she'd had to run? He'd have been happy munching on cardboard if it had kept her inside!

The only good thing that had come out of the shooting was that the police would now be stationed outside the townhouse whenever Allison was home. They were taking the threats against her even more seriously.

Still, Allison's admission brought home an unpleasant truth: they'd both gotten more focused on exploring the new-found physical chemistry between them than on keeping her safe.

Instead of thinking of him as a bodyguard whose orders should be followed to a T, Allison had been thinking of him as a lover who wouldn't necessarily get furious with her for disregarding what he'd said. She'd gone out and risked her life because she'd been planning to surprise him with a romantic dinner, for God's sake!

For his part, as much as he'd tried to convince himself otherwise, sleeping with her had changed everything. He wasn't the cool-headed expert he needed to be in dangerous situations. Instead, he was running on emotion because the thought of anything happening to her tied him up in knots.

Aloud, he said, "That's it? You ran out to the store so you could

cook dinner?” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Where was your judgment?”

She folded her arms. “Obviously, in the wrong place,” she said sarcastically, “if I was thinking of cooking dinner for you. Clearly I was wasting my time.”

Anger battled with relief inside him. “You’re still the rash, headstrong princess, aren’t you? When are you going to learn to think before you act?”

“Well, I’m thinking now,” she said coldly, dropping her arms. “And what I’m thinking is that taking our relationship to a new level was a mistake.” She flashed him a look of disdain. “I should have known.”

She should have known? Heck, *he* should have known. He should have known better than to get involved with her.

He and Allison came from different worlds and he was a fool to have forgotten that for even a minute. She was the sheltered daughter of a wealthy family and he’d always be the guy who climbed out of rough-and-tumble, blue-collar South Boston.

Even after Harvard, even after more than ten years building a multimillion-dollar business, he was still rough around the edges. His South Boston accent trickled in when he wasn’t careful. And, frankly, he didn’t blend with the country-club set and never would.

Still, the fact that she’d brought up their different backgrounds in an argument riled him. “You can try chalking me up as a mistake,” he said silkily, “but we’re dynamite in bed together.”

“Go to—”

“I’m betting,” he said, cutting her off, “that the pretty boys over at the country club haven’t done nearly as good a job of satisfying you, have they, petunia? Otherwise you wouldn’t still be looking for a roll in the sack with a guy who’s seen the seedier side of life.”

Her face had gone pale with anger. “That’s right, Rafferty, and I’m glad you realized it, because that’s all you were. A nice little frolic,” she said, her voice haughty with disdain, “but certainly not someone I’d contemplate having a real relationship with.”

He grabbed her arm as she stalked by him, whirling her to face him, but she shrugged off his hand.

“Give it up!” she said, her eyes flashing.

Ignoring her request, he followed her down the corridor toward the back of the house. They weren’t done, not by a long shot. That she’d even try to dismiss him as nothing more than a quick fling had him seething.

Entering the kitchen, she went over to the sink.

“Dammit, we’re not done.”

“Oh, we’re done all right,” she said without turning around, starting to rinse a glass. “Done, over, finished.”

He laughed derisively. “If you believe that, petunia, then leprechauns live at the end of the rainbow.”

“What I believe, Rafferty,” she said, turning around, “is that you need to cool off!”

A spray of cold water hit him square in the face before he

could react. “What the—!” Raising his arms to shield his face, he stalked toward her.

They wrestled with the hose from the sink, water dousing them both, until he was able to yank the nozzle out of her hand.

He was about to let her know exactly what he thought but then his gaze dropped a notch, connecting with the front of her white shirt, which was plastered to her, her nipples clearly visible through the clingy fabric of her wet bra and shirt.

His blood heated.

She raised her arms to shield herself.

“Don’t,” he muttered.

She went still. “Damn you, Rafferty,” she whispered. “I don’t want this.”

He raised his gaze, meeting her eyes. “Whether we want it or not seems almost beside the point,” he said in a bemused voice. “It’s there between us and always has been.”

She tossed her head, wet strands of hair sending droplets onto them both. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Liar,” he chided softly, moving before her.

They were practically toe-to-toe now. He let his eyes drop down to her mouth, which parted on a soft breath.

“That’s right, darling,” he taunted. “Let me see how you feel.”

Her eyes sparked fire. “Go to—”

His head swooped down then and he swallowed the end of her sentence in a kiss that was searing and desperate—as searing and desperate and hot as his need for her.

He was still running on the remnants of the adrenaline that had started earlier in the parking lot, except that now the reality of their near brush with death, mixed with relief, was channeling that energy into a need for sexual release. Even understanding what was provoking him, however, was not enough for his intellect to overcome his baser instincts.

She moaned in his arms, meeting him kiss for desperate kiss, her hands tangling in his hair, anchoring him.

He lifted her up onto the kitchen counter, sand-wiching himself between her legs as her skirt rode high on her thighs.

The need to affirm life, to stamp her as his, was overwhelming.

Hot mouth met hot mouth in desperate, soul-stirring kisses. He hungered to be inside her, to give vent to his frustration by seeking the release he knew awaited him there.

He lifted his head and yanked her shirt out of the waistband of her skirt, popping the buttons on the front of the garment in his haste to rid her of it.

When he'd peeled the shirt off of her, he bent his head to close his mouth over the peak of one breast through the fabric of her bra.

She made a sound that came out as half laugh, half gasp. "Connor!"

He shifted his mouth to her other breast, his hand at her back to urge her forward toward his mouth.

He felt her fingers threading through his hair, her breath

coming rapidly. "Please," she gasped.

Her need inflamed him.

Raising his head, he let her tug him back to her as she pulled at the bottom of his shirt to loosen it from his jeans.

Their movements were jerky and desperate as they both attempted to rid him of his wet shirt.

As the shirt dropped to the floor, he realized they weren't going to be able to wait much longer. "Hang on," he said roughly, unsnapping his jeans and tugging the zipper downward.

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

He fumbled with a foil packet from his wallet. Then his fingers pushed aside her underwear. Testing and finding her warm and wet, he groaned.

"Connor," she said, her voice cloudy with passion.

He shifted, pulling her forward to the edge of the counter, and then over, sliding her down on him even as he pushed upward.

She gasped. "Please, yes."

He took up a rhythm then, abandoning himself to turbulent sensation and fiery passion as she clung to him, her legs wrapped around him, her head nestled in the curve of his shoulder and her breathing rapid.

His muscles strained, and his breathing grew more labored as the tension mounted. She moaned, and arched in his arms.

Their mutual release when it came was quick and powerful. He felt her tense, gasp, call his name, seconds before he lost himself in oblivion.

Tap, tap, tap. Realizing she'd again been lost in thought, Allison put down the pencil she'd been tapping against the desk that she sometimes called hers in the District Attorney's Office.

The events of Saturday night replayed themselves in her mind.

What had he called her? *A rash, headstrong princess.*

How dare he! He'd spoken and acted as if he thought she hadn't changed much, as if she were—still—a naive, wayward teenager. Even now, having a deeper appreciation for how his protective instincts had developed, she couldn't excuse how he'd dismissively labeled her

His words and actions rankled all the more because this time, instead of merely visiting a bar because she harbored a secret crush on him, she'd actually slept with him. She'd let him strip her bare both physically and emotionally. The betrayal this time was oh so much worse.

She'd begun to think they had a new understanding, one based on mutual respect. Instead, he'd apparently been thinking of her as nothing more than a spoiled little heiress, albeit one with whom he enjoyed amazing chemistry.

In fact, after the shooting, he'd acted just like her family with his overprotectiveness. He'd lit into her as if she were still an underage teenager lacking judgment.

Her lips tightened reflexively.

Their relationship—however short-lived—had been a mistake. Of that, she was now certain. There was no way they could have a real relationship—one based on mutual trust and

respect—when he'd made it clear he saw her as nothing more than a sheltered and pampered princess.

She'd been insane to have been planning to welcome him home with a romantic dinner. Ironically, thanks to their argument, she now agreed with him about going out for ingredients for dessert.

She should have nuked some macaroni and cheese, slid a bowl at him, and told him that he was dining in style. Or, better yet, handed him a spoon and invited him to enjoy the stuff directly from a can.

Men were such animals.

Speaking of which...her face burned as she recalled the frenzied interlude on the kitchen counter that had followed their argument.

She should have kneed him and walked away. Instead, a combustible combination of relief at having escaped unharmed and anger at him had led to sizzling sex—as if Connor needed any further evidence that, if nothing else, they were great lovers.

She wondered at the reference he'd made to the attraction that had always been between them. Could he have known about her teenaged infatuation with him? Did he know she'd been in the bar that night in the hope of seeing him?

At least she hadn't admitted her teenaged infatuation to him. That would have made her humiliation complete.

Her phone rang, startling her out of her thoughts. Picking up the receiver, she said, "Hello?"

“Allison!”

“Hello, Quentin.” She made her voice cool. Her brother was still on her less-than-wonderful persons list.

“Thank God you’re okay!”

Someone had obviously spilled the beans to Quentin about Saturday’s incident—the details of which had miraculously stayed out of the newspapers—and she had a good idea who that someone was. She sighed. “Yes, I’m fine. No need to worry.”

“No need to worry?” Quentin said, sounding uncharacteristically agitated. “Are you crazy? You could have been killed and that’s all you have to say?”

“Well, as you can tell, I wasn’t. So, sorry to say, your younger sister is still here to torment you.”

“Quit it with the glibness, Ally,” her brother said impatiently. “You’re just lucky Mom and Dad are in Europe on vacation at the moment and Noah and Matt are on business trips. Otherwise, they’d all be descending on you.”

“Don’t I know it,” she muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Heck, I’d have been there myself if I didn’t have some VIPs coming into the office this morning,” Quentin said. “Anyway, Connor assured me that he has everything under control.”

Her hand tightened on the receiver. “Oh, he did, did he?”

She heard Quentin sigh. “Allison, for the love of God, would you just try listening to Connor for a change? I know you two

can barely stand each other—”

She wondered what Quentin’s reaction would have been if he’d known she and Connor had recently found one area where they *could* deal with each other.

“—but he’s there to protect you,” Quentin continued, “and he’s one of the best in the business. So would you quit trying to make the guy’s job harder than it has to be?”

“And I still have a job to do, Quentin,” she said, her tone clipped, “and that’s putting the baddies behind bars. Unfortunately, that may involve some risks.”

“Right and that’s another thing.” Quentin paused and cleared his throat, seeming to choose his words carefully. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do after the DA’s Office? You’ve been there, what? Four or five years?”

“Close to five. But who’s counting when you’re having fun?”

“I don’t think the family can take much more of this, Allison. This latest episode with your getting shot at may be the nail in the coffin for Mom and Dad.”

She closed her eyes. “You’ve told them?”

“Not yet, but *someone* has to because the papers may link your name to the shooting sooner or later,” he said significantly.

She opened her eyes again. “Fine, I know.” She could already picture the newspaper headlines. Years of hard work trying to stake an identity for herself apart from her well-known family would evaporate before her eyes.

“All I’m saying is you may want to start thinking about

when this stint at the DA's Office is going to end. It's just too dangerous. Connor said the usual stint is three years or so."

Connor had said that, had he? She'd be interested in knowing what else Connor had said. "Maybe it isn't just a stint. Have you thought about that? Maybe I want to climb the ladder at the DA's Office."

Quentin didn't say anything but a distinct sigh came over the line.

"Besides," she persisted, "I'm not the only one taking risks, Quentin. Everyone in the office has a tough job. If it weren't me, it'd be someone else."

"All right, that's all praiseworthy and good, but the fact of the matter is that it *is* you," Quentin argued. "*You've* been the one getting threats. *You've* been the one getting shot at. And, you can't tell me that your name and your family's wealth and high profile don't put you at special risk."

She thought about the phone threat she'd gotten: kidnapped and held "for a pretty penny." Quentin had inadvertently hit the mark. Aloud, she said, "I'm not going to be boxed in by a whole set of rules just because of my last name."

Quentin started to interrupt, but she went on, "And you can tell your friend Connor not to worry. I won't be trying to cook dinner for him again anytime soon."

If it were possible, she was even more annoyed with Connor by the time she got off the phone.

Ratted her out to her family again, had he? He hadn't even

waited for her to tell them in her own way. Instead, he'd lost no time in spilling the entire story to Quentin as if she were still a recalcitrant teen whose family he had to enlist to keep her in line.

Had he also had the gall to suggest to Quentin that she should be looking to move on from the DA's Office because the prosecutor's job had become too dangerous for her? Is that how the thought had occurred to Quentin?

She wouldn't put it past Connor.

She narrowed her eyes. If Connor thought things were icy between them now, she fumed, he'd better get ready for a deep freeze.

## Chapter Eight

Connor faced the mirror and attempted once again to work his tuxedo tie into a knot.

For the past week, he and Allison had avoided each other as much as it was possible to while still living under the same roof. That had not been as hard to accomplish as it might otherwise have been, since she'd been working late all week. As a result, he'd been able to catch up on things at the office and schedule some evening meetings.

Yet, the tension between them continued to mount, despite—or maybe because of—the fact he was back to sleeping in the bedroom down the hall from hers. He was still furious with her, but he was also suffering from a serious bout of sexual frustration.

They were like two tigers circling each other in the cage. And, unfortunately, their days of circling were about to come to an end.

Tonight was the Cortland Ball, and even he knew it was the biggest and oldest charity ball of the Boston social season.

Usually he avoided such events like the plague. His company was well-known enough that he didn't have to hobnob with the rich and snooty. Business came to him.

But the Whittaker Foundation was one of the major sponsors of the Cortland Ball this year, so Allison had to attend. And if

Allison had to attend, *he* had to attend.

Even if they were barely on speaking terms. Even if his damned bow tie was choking him, he thought irritably, running his finger around inside the collar of his shirt now that he had worked his tie into a perfect if slightly too-tight knot. He left his bedroom and headed downstairs.

The one perk to attending this shindig was that Hugh Kendall, the indicted business executive Allison was prosecuting, would be there. It would be a first-class opportunity to study one of the prime suspects in the threats against Allison.

When Connor got downstairs to the front hall, he checked his cell-phone messages again and resigned himself to waiting for Allison to come down the stairs.

Ten minutes later, a small sound alerted him to her presence moments before he glanced up. When he did, the sight of her stole his breath away.

She was wrapped in a strapless, sky-blue sheath that hugged all the right curves. The style of her hair, piled high on her head—thanks to the work of the stylist who had come to the door earlier—further accentuated her elegant décolletage.

As she came down the stairs, the deep slit in her gown parted like a curtain to reveal shapely legs and feet shod in silver, high-heeled pumps. She clutched a small silver purse in one hand and jewels glittered at her ears and wrist.

Diamonds, he noted with the modicum of his brain not given over to carnal lust. Yet her neck was bare.

If they'd been married, he thought, and preparing for tonight, he'd have given her diamonds to adorn her neck, too. He'd have trailed kisses along her neck, across her collarbone, and down to the cleavage revealed by the heart-shaped neckline of her gown. Exactly, he realized, as her ensemble was designed to encourage him—or more precisely, any red-blooded male—to do.

She looked every inch the princess that he often taunted her as being. Except, instead of conjuring the mockery he often made a pretense of exhibiting, he felt every fiber within him tense with elemental attraction.

As she neared the last step, he mentally shook himself and held out his hand to her.

Her eyes flashed fire, but she let him assist her the rest of the way. And while the expression on her face said she was still displeased with him, her heightened color also said she was not immune to the physical attraction between them either.

He'd been pleased when she'd told him that she didn't have an escort for tonight. If she'd had one, he had a hunch he'd have wanted to rip the guy apart.

She arched a brow. "Looked your fill?" she asked tartly, her chin coming up.

"For that I'd have to peel you out of that gown," he parried, knowing his words would rile her.

"Then you'll be looking for a very long time," she said frostily, opening the door to the hall closet and retrieving a wrap. "And if your eyelids are liable to be glued open all night, I hope you're

bringing along some eye drops.”

“Why don’t you carry a bottle of the stuff for me?” he asked lazily. “Then when I’m afflicted—as I inevitably will be because I *intend* to watch you all evening, princess—you can come minister to me.”

She closed the closet door with a thud, wrap in hand. “The only way I’ll be ministering to you is with a swift kick in the—”

“Tut-tut,” he interrupted, now thoroughly enjoying himself. “This is a charity ball, remember? And isn’t charity supposed to begin at home?”

“Here’s a news flash for you, Rafferty, in case the message hasn’t gotten through to that iron-plated ego of yours,” she said, yanking open the front door and then stopping abruptly without going out. “I haven’t exactly been feeling charitable toward you lately.”

When they arrived at the Riverton Ballroom, where the gala was being held, Connor noted Allison lost no time in breaking away from him in order to mingle with the other guests during the predinner cocktail hour. She seemed to know most of the people there and socialized easily.

And why not? he thought. She’d grown up in this world.

Seeing her in her natural milieu underscored the differences in their backgrounds. He’d been furious when she’d thrown those differences back at him in the heat of their argument, but, if ever he was tempted to agree with her that those differences doomed a relationship between them, now would be the time.

He sipped from his wineglass and watched as Allison smiled and nodded at one of the male guests. The bland-as-a-vanilla-wafer jerk was looking at her as if she were an ornament he was planning to hang on his illustrious family tree.

Sloan, his name was, if Connor remembered the face correctly. A member of the Makepeace family, listed in the Social Register and tracing its lineage back to the *Mayflower*—as any good Boston Brahmin family would.

Connor's lips twisted as he watched Sloan Makepeace lean toward Allison.

Then he caught himself. He had a job tonight and it wasn't ogling Allison. Oh, he intended to keep his eyes on her, all right, just as he'd said, but that was only to make sure she stayed safe and stayed *put*.

Connor took another sip of his wine and scanned the room—just in time to catch sight of Hugh Kendall making an appearance at one of the doorways to the ballroom.

The businessman looked shorter and stockier than he had in the pictures Connor had seen of him in the papers. He was definitely balding, though, around fifty, and no more than medium height.

Connor watched as Kendall and his date—a grand dame of the Boston social scene—moved among the guests. If the news reports were right, Kendall's decade-long marriage had ended several years ago and he had since become a popular man-about-town, squiring socialites to high-profile events.

A sycophantic prig, he thought. Allison was right. Kendall's social standing was clearly essential to him. If the allegations of embezzlement stuck, he would be ruined. Not only would he be heading to prison, but he'd be an outcast from the upper crust.

For all his posturing, Kendall had little more than his money to gain him entry to events such as the Cortland Ball.

Connor had done some digging and he knew Kendall neither came from an old-line family nor shared old prep-school ties with the people here tonight.

According to his investigation, Kendall had grown up in an upper-middle-class family in New Hampshire and had attended public schools before graduating from college with a business degree and moving to Boston to start his ascent in the business world.

Connor glanced over at Allison and noted she'd also marked Kendall's arrival. He knew without asking, however, that she would avoid Kendall. It would be improper for a prosecutor to be talking to a defendant in one of her cases.

On the other hand, Connor reflected, Kendall looked at ease despite the fact that nearly everyone there tonight must know he'd had the audacity to show up even though Allison, who was prosecuting his case, would be present.

Connor narrowed his eyes. If Kendall was their man, then Allison's harasser was a cool cucumber. Exactly the type who would be hard to catch. And exactly the type he intended to watch like a hawk.

Allison glanced around the ballroom. She'd managed to shake Connor for the time being. Unfortunately, though, her parents were bearing down on her. She braced herself as they approached. "Hello, Mom."

"Ally." Her mother leaned in for a kiss before drawing back and looking searchingly at her face, concern etched on hers. "How are you feeling? Are you having any trouble sleeping? Because if you are—"

"Mom, I'm fine." She'd spoken with her parents earlier in the week about the shooting incident, but she'd spared them the details, which would just have worried them needlessly.

Her parents exchanged looks. Her father was an older version of Quentin, but his dark hair was peppered with gray, giving him a distinguished look.

"You should have told us you'd received another death threat in the mail just days before the shooting," her father said gravely.

Allison suppressed her irritation. Connor, it seemed, had been talking again. "I didn't want to worry you and Mom unnecessarily," she said, hoping the explanation was one they'd be satisfied with. "You were on a business trip hundreds of miles away last week. There was nothing you could do except worry even more than you'd already been doing."

"Of course we would have worried!" her mother exclaimed.

Allison took a deep breath. "Thanks to Quentin, I have a bodyguard, remember? I'm taking precautions."

"Connor said that you'd gone out without him when you were

attacked,” her father countered.

Snitch. What else had he told her parents? All she needed in order to make her humiliation complete was for Connor to have divulged the reason she’d left the house. Aloud, she said, “Connor has been saying a lot these days.” She turned as Quentin parted from Liz, who was speaking to another woman, and strolled up to join them. “What else has Connor been saying, Quent?”

Quentin held up his hands. “Hey, he’s only trying to help.”

“I thought I was just getting a bodyguard,” she said indignantly, “but, apparently, Connor is doing double duty as a spy.”

“Now, Allison—”

“You should have warned me, Quent. If I’d known Connor was reporting everything to you and the rest of the family, I’d at least have given him something interesting to relay. You know, wild parties, dancing on tables, men swinging from the chandelier... male strippers...”

“Actually,” Quentin said dryly, “getting information out of Connor is like prying open a clam with your bare hands.”

“Oh, come on.” She cocked her head. “Are you going to deny he lost no time telling you about the shooting incident last week? Even before I had the chance to pick up the phone?”

Quentin frowned. “Only because I phoned him and demanded to know what the heck had happened the night before. I had gotten a call from the police to let me know that they were going to do everything possible to try to keep the tabloid journalists

at bay about the shooting. One of the nice things about being a major donor to police charities is that the police brass remembers you when, say, your sister is involved in a shooting.” Quentin paused and gave her a meaningful look. “Naturally, I had to ask *what* shooting.”

“I was going to call you,” she said, knowing she sounded a bit defensive. The truth was she hadn’t been relishing that conversation with her brother—or any other member of her family for that matter. She knew her family well enough to know their reactions would have fallen somewhere between alarm and panic, and she hadn’t been wrong.

“After I got a call from the police,” Quentin added, “I phoned Connor.”

“Don’t you mean interrogated?” she asked, her annoyance coming through in her tone. “And why didn’t you bother to call me first?”

“Because,” Quentin said patiently, “given a choice between the two of you, I knew I’d have a better shot with him at getting the straight story.”

She crossed her arms. “Are you saying I would have lied?”

Her brother gave her a knowing look. “Artful omission is more like it.”

Allison dropped her arms in exasperation. “Whatever.”

“And, yes, believe it or not, I did have to threaten and cajole Connor,” Quentin went on. “He initially told me to call *you*. I think the only reason he eventually said anything at all was that I’d

already found out more or less what happened from the police.”

So maybe Connor hadn't gone racing to her brother with the news.

“I must say, I agree with Quentin,” her mother put in. “Connor seemed very reluctant to go into much detail about the shooting when your father and I asked him about it. Frankly, I think he wanted to spare us unnecessary worry.”

“And, by the way,” her father added, “Connor is not the one who told us about the threat you'd received in the mail. That was something that the police mentioned to Quentin when they called him.”

She looked across the ballroom and her eyes met Connor's. The look on his face said he was debating whether to walk over. She shook her head almost imperceptibly. She didn't need his help handling her family.

She did owe him an apology though—at least for jumping to the conclusion that he'd raced to her family to blab about the shooting.

Sitting next to Connor at dinner was torture, Allison thought. Her family, fortunately, was sitting among guests at other tables. Otherwise, it would have been much harder to pretend interest in the mundane chitchat being carried on at her table.

She took another bite of her dessert. Mercifully, the guest on her left had just excused himself to say hello to people he knew at another table.

She itched to hash things out with Connor. She wanted to

apologize, yes. At the same time, though, she was still piqued about the high-handed way he'd acted after the attack in the parking lot. Surely he owed her an apology as well?

She stole a look at him. He was chatting with the guest on his right, the wife of a Congressman. Connor's slightly rough-around-the-edges quality was set off tonight by his tuxedo. The juxtaposition was incredibly sexy and, she noted sourly, apparently appreciated by the Congressman's wife as well.

The stab of jealousy brought her up short. She was spared having to analyze the emotion, however, because Connor took that moment to turn to her.

"Dance with me?" he asked. His lips were curved upward but his tone was mocking. "I think we can survive it, don't you?" He nodded around their table at the empty seats and the couple getting up at the other end. "Besides, it will look odd if we didn't take at least one turn around the room."

She nodded and let him help her rise from her seat. The dance floor might finally afford her the opportunity and privacy to get her apology over with.

When they were out on the dance floor, he drew her to him for the start of a slow song. If she'd been dispassionate, she would have said his touch felt light but firm. But, since she was far from feeling detached, his touch—from their bodies brushing to his hand at her back guiding her—was causing waves of pulsating sensation to radiate outward from the points of contact.

For a while, they danced without speaking, gliding across the

dance floor to a slow and sweet song until the temptation to rest her head on his shoulder became palpable.

She gave herself a mental shake. She had things to say to him and she'd better get on with it.

Before she could say anything, however, he stirred the hair at her temple with his breath and murmured, "Silence becomes you."

She looked up with a start and saw the mocking laughter in his eyes. She'd been practically swooning in his arms—while thinking that she had to apologize to him—and he was mocking her! She decided the apology she owed him could wait a little longer. "Humility would become you but I don't see you exhibiting any."

"That's my girl." He had the nerve to laugh outright. "I was wondering where that temper of yours had gone. You seemed as deflated as a dead balloon during dinner."

Well, Allison thought, so much for her attempt at seeming at ease during dinner. "Quite the one for compliments tonight, aren't you?"

"Is that what you want? Compliments?" he asked. Though his tone was still mocking, it contained a hint of seriousness.

"Don't be ridiculous."

He cocked his head, pretending to think, before clearing his throat and looking down at her. "Your eyes have the color and sparkle of aquamarines, your hair the darkness and luster of a night sky—"

“Stop.” Even knowing he was teasing, his words sent a ripple of liquid pleasure through her.

“Why?”

“Because we’re in a room full of people.” And she couldn’t take anymore.

“Ah.” His eyes gleamed. “Haven’t you ever heard that dancing is the vertical expression of a horizontal desire?”

He was telling her? She was practically going up in flames, incensed yet aroused by their banter.

“So how am I doing? Am I as good as Slade?”

“Who?”

“Preppy boy.”

She must have continued to wear a blank look, because he added impatiently, “Mr. Make-Love-Not-War.”

“That’s Makepeace,” she said, correcting him.

“Same thing.”

“And his name is Sloan, not Slade.”

“Yeah, whatever. Were Makepeace’s compliments as good?” He leaned closer to whisper in her ear. “I bet he didn’t turn you on, petunia.”

He was impossible. Forget the apology. She figured he owed *her* one by this point, but she was willing to consider the two of them even if it meant she could get rid of him *now*.

His lips turned up a notch. “The look on your face is saying you want to kick me in the shins.”

“And some other places.”

“You’re too fiery for a milksop like Makepeace.”

The song they were dancing to faded into another slow tune.

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Connor cast her a disbelieving look. “Seems to me you’ve already made up your mind. Otherwise, you wouldn’t still have a thing for guys from the wrong side of the tracks.”

One guy in particular, but she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that. Especially since he seemed to be taking pleasure in baiting her. “You know,” she said, her voice dripping disdain, “I must have been crazy even to have thought I owed you an apology.”

She had the satisfaction of seeing him look taken aback for an instant. That expression was quickly replaced by one of sardonic amusement however. “I can think of many reasons why you’d owe me an apology, petunia. So why don’t you narrow it down for me and tell me what in particular spurred this fit of remorse?”

She gritted her teeth. The only remorse she was feeling at the moment was at not having clobbered him. But, instead, she said, “I got a call from Quentin on the morning after the incident in the parking lot. He seemed to know all about what had happened without my telling him.”

“So naturally you thought I was the one who called to fill him in,” he supplied.

“It was a logical assumption to have jumped to under the circumstances,” she said defensively.

He arched a brow. “Logical because I’m an untrustworthy

snitch where you're concerned, is that it?" His lips tightened. "Ever since I lied to you and went to your folks with the story of you at the biker bar when you were seventeen. It goes as far back as that, doesn't it?"

"It wasn't a far-fetched conclusion to jump to," she asserted again. "Anyway, are you also going to deny suggesting to Quentin that I quit the DA's Office because the job may have become too dangerous for me?"

"I didn't suggest it to him. He brought it up." He gave her a considering look, then added, "But I won't say I disagree."

Her temper flared. Fortunately, the song they were dancing to faded away and the band decided to take a break.

She pulled out of Connor's hold. "Great, then the sooner we find out who's been making the threats, the sooner my job will stop being so dangerous and the sooner *you* can get the heck out of my house. Frankly, it won't be a moment too soon for my taste. On either count."

She turned on her heel, not giving him a chance to respond, though she noted that his face had tightened with anger.

*Of all the nerve.* She'd been a lovesick fool to think something unique and lasting had been developing between them. Instead of giving her his respect, it was clear that to him, she'd always be a spoiled little rich girl who needed protection. *His* protection.

## Chapter Nine

It was Saturday, the day of the annual Memorial Day Weekend barbecue at Allison's parents' house.

Usually Connor looked forward to this Whittaker family tradition. Usually, but not this year.

Last year, according to what had since become Whittaker family lore, the barbecue had marked the kickoff of Quentin and Elizabeth's whirlwind relationship. Allison had made her famous suggestion that her brother act as her best friend's sperm donor. Now, one year later, Connor's old college buddy was happily married to Liz and the father of newborn Nicholas.

Connor took a swig of his beer and chanced a glance across the lawn at the cause of his dour mood. Allison was cuddling baby Nicholas in her arms, making cooing noises. The baby must have done something unexpectedly funny because she looked up, laughing, and their eyes met.

She looked away quickly, but not before a yearning so strong it hurt slammed into him. It wasn't a pure physical need for her, he realized. It was deeper, more powerful. A vision of her cradling their own baby flashed across his mind.

Then he pulled himself up short. She was tying him up in knots and it had to stop. Until they found out who was threatening her, he reminded himself, sorting out his relationship with Allison was on hold.

With any luck, though, the holding pattern wouldn't have to continue much longer. He felt for his cell phone again. No call yet, but there was time. Guests were still arriving at the Whittaker's house.

In the meantime, he thought self-deprecatingly, he could brood at leisure. The Cortland Ball had brought home for him that he and Allison were from different worlds. And, as furious as he still was about her tossing that in his face in the middle of an argument, he'd since acknowledged to himself that there was some validity to her point.

"Hey, Rafferty."

He turned and caught a volleyball just before it hit him in the stomach.

Noah Whittaker sauntered up, a grin on his face.

"Still greeting your guests with a sucker punch to the stomach?" Connor asked dryly.

"No, just you," Noah replied, then gave him another easy grin. "It's one of the rituals reserved for brothers, honorary or otherwise."

Since his college days, Connor acknowledged, he'd had an easy camaraderie with Noah, who had the reputation of being the most fun-loving of the Whittaker brothers.

"Stop doing your brooding James Dean impersonation and get your rear end moving," Noah continued. "There's a volleyball game starting up and we're beating Quentin and Matt's team again this year so I can claim bragging rights to a winning streak."

Connor tossed the volleyball back at him and asked wryly, “You mean so you can make it two years in a row?”

“Hey, you gotta start somewhere.”

“Fine, I’m game.” As he and Noah made their way to the back of the house, he figured volleyball was preferable to standing around ruminating over Allison.

Noah slanted him a look. “Allison’s on our team. Is that cool with you?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Just because he alternated between wanting to shake some sense into her and a desperate need to make passionate love to her didn’t mean he couldn’t play nice if the situation called for it.

“Don’t know.” Noah shrugged. “Maybe because you two singe everyone around you with the sparks you throw off when you’re near each other. Heck, someone who didn’t know you might think you two were crazy about each other.”

Connor almost stopped in his tracks.

Noah’s comment was startling, Connor realized, because it was true. He *was* crazy about Allison. Crazy in love with her. Not just want, not just desire. Love.

It was the right name for what he’d been feeling all along, he finally realized. And, if it was the last thing he did, he’d get her to admit she felt the same way about him. Then they could talk about their differences.

He couldn’t change who he was and where he’d come from, but he loved her deeply and irrevocably. And if that still wasn’t

enough for her, well—his heart clenched—she could just try to find a guy who'd care for her more than he did.

Noah waved a hand in front of his eyes. "Hey, Rafferty, you still on Earth with the rest of us mortals?"

Connor knew Noah was expecting a flip response, so he said, "If it hasn't been apparent, your sister has been barely acknowledging my existence lately."

"You do know how to push her buttons, I'll give you that."

"Likewise, she's not so bad at pushing buttons herself."

Noah threw him an amused look. "Why don't you help take her off our hands?" he joked. "You know my parents think you're great. And, you'd be doing us a favor if you two got hitched."

Connor looked at Noah quizzically. He could swear there was a note of underlying seriousness to Noah's kidding but Noah's face revealed nothing other than his typical expression of amusement at the world. "If you value your health, you won't let Allison hear about that scheme."

As much as the Whittakers thought of him as family, Connor doubted any of them really regarded him as an ideal mate for the family's precious darling. No amount of polish would ever get rid of some of his rough edges.

Noah cast him a look of mock offense. "Me? Plotting to marry off Allison?"

Connor tossed him a skeptical look as they reached the volleyball net set up on a corner of the lawn in the Whittaker's backyard.

Noah sighed heavily as if being forced to confess. “Okay, yeah. Guilty.” He shrugged, looking far from repentant. “Ever since Allison got ol’ Quent hitched to Liz last year, I’ve suspected that she’s set her sights on me and Matt. And, you know what they say, the best defense is a good offense.”

“In other words,” Connor supplied, playing along, “get her hitched to me before she gets you hitched?”

“Exactly.” Noah added with a pretense of ruefulness, “Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

Connor looked over to see Allison joining the crowd near the net. “Yeah,” he agreed, “but I’m not sure I’m good enough for our little princess.”

Noah scoffed, dropping his teasing demeanor. “You’re kidding, right? The folks adore you. They’ve never said it, but I think they’d be pleased if you and Allison ever wound up together. And, I’ve got to tell you, it would be a relief for me, Matt and Quentin.” He gave a mock shudder. “Have you seen some of the guys Allison has brought home?”

Unfortunately, he had...and he agreed with Noah. He nodded over at Allison and said, “The princess might have some objections though.”

Noah followed his gaze. “Yeah, I know Allison can get into her nose-in-the-air routine with you. But, I always thought that was just a defensive mechanism. You know, a way to show you that you don’t get to her when you obviously do.”

She showed him all right. Every opportunity she got. Aloud,

he said, testing, “Just supposing I was willing to help you implement this little plot of yours—purely in the interest of helping you escape a possible marriage trap, of course—”

“Of course,” Noah agreed readily.

“What’s to say that you, Matt, and Quent don’t beat me to a pulp for unintentionally breaking the princess’s heart.”

Noah cocked his head, pretending to consider that for a moment. “Okay, yeah, I grant you that’s a risk. Under the circumstances, though,” he said, his tone nonchalant, “I’d say it’s more likely that the danger would be that the princess would break your heart.”

Connor tossed him a quizzical look, but Noah’s face revealed nothing. The youngest Whittaker brother, Connor thought, was way more depth than the fun-loving playboy the gossip columns portrayed him as.

Noah slapped him on the back. “Come on. We’ve got a game to play,” he said, walking with him toward where the other players were standing, “and I can’t wait to cream these guys.”

As it turned out, their team eked out a victory for the second year in a row. Afterward, Connor sat down with a cold beer and some hot dogs. It was dusk and the party was starting to wind down.

He was just finishing his second hot dog when his cell phone rang. Sliding the phone out of his pocket, he noted that the name on the display was that of one of his top deputies.

He quickly excused himself and walked toward a nearby tree.

No use getting the Whittakers' expectations up if the news wasn't what he hoped. He'd had a hunch, though, and had followed through on it.

The call was brief but nevertheless had him wanting to punch the air with satisfaction.

When he got back to the picnic table, he sat down next to Allison and, keeping his tone as mild as possible because he knew his words alone would be shocking enough, murmured, "They've caught Kendall."

She stopped in midmotion while reaching for a can of soda and swung to face him. "He's been arrested?"

He nodded. "And my guess is he'll be held without bail under the circumstances."

He watched as a variety of emotions flitted across her face. "Why?" she asked finally, seeming to settle on that one word as vague enough to encompass anything he might tell her.

Matt Whittaker glanced over at them from the other side of the table. "What's wrong?"

"Yeah," Noah chimed in, "you look pale, sis."

Connor looked down the table and noticed that they'd gotten Allison's parents' and Quent and Liz's attention, too.

It was just as well. He could get the story over with in one telling. "Hugh Kendall has been arrested in connection with the threats against Allison."

Liz gasped while Noah uttered an expletive that Connor privately agreed with. Then everybody tried to talk at once.

“How did the police catch him?” Allison’s father asked finally, making himself heard after the initial tumult had died down.

“The police executed a warrant and searched Kendall’s house and car,” Connor said. “They found a gun there that matches the type of .32-caliber weapon they think was used in the parking-lot shooting, based on the type of slugs they recovered that night.”

“They executed a warrant? Based on what evidence?” Allison asked. She had been looking relieved since he’d told her the news, but now her tone was tinged with suspicion. “Were they able to trace the color of the car that the gunman used back to Kendall?”

“Does Kendall even have a state gun license?” Noah added.

Connor shook his head. “The answers to your questions are no and no. But, the police concluded that the slugs had probably come from a make of gun that hadn’t been manufactured in a long time, so I decided to have my people do some more digging.”

“Good going,” Matt said, nodding approvingly.

“I had a couple of my investigators visit gun shops around Boston,” Connor explained. “One shop owner recalled someone fitting Kendall’s description asking about possibly *selling* some guns a while back. They were practically collector’s items, and the guy who came in wanted to know how much they’d be worth.”

Connor looked around the room. He had everyone’s undivided attention, it seemed.

“None of the stuff I’d dug up on Kendall revealed that he was a gun enthusiast or even into hunting,” he went on. “So, I figured, if Kendall did own some unlicensed guns and he was in fact the

guy who had gone into the gun shop trying to sell some classic firearms, then he'd probably inherited some handguns. Once I had one of my investigators look into probate court records in New Hampshire, I knew we definitely had our man."

"How so?" asked Liz.

"Kendall's father's will is on file," he responded. "It reveals that he gave his gun collection to his son and that collection included the type of .32-caliber the police think was used in the shooting."

Connor looked at Allison and didn't add the fact that, since Kendall had kept the gun after the shooting, instead of disposing of the incriminating weapon, there was a good chance he was thinking of using it again, and to fatal effect.

The thought again sent chills down Connor's spine. As soon as all the clues had been gathered, he'd turned over his evidence to the police so a warrant could be executed. The urge first to beat the crap out of Kendall himself had been hard to resist however.

"What about the guy you saw lurking outside the townhouse that first night?" Allison asked. "Do you think it was Kendall who sped away that time?"

Connor nodded. "Probably. And, as we suspected, Kendall was throwing us off the scent by making it seem as if the threats were coming from a run-of-the-mill hood."

"The note in the mail with the bad English you mean?" Allison asked.

Connor nodded. "Among other things."

“We all owe you a debt of gratitude, Connor,” Allison’s father said. “You know you’re like family to us, but let us know if there’s ever a way we can repay you.”

Connor noted that, next to him, Allison stiffened slightly. “You mean on top of his hefty fees?” she asked.

Quentin shook his head. “Actually, I offered to pay him—” Quentin either ignored or didn’t see the quelling look that Connor shot him “—but he refused. He insisted on volunteering his services.”

Allison swiveled toward him and Connor met her look head-on. He could see what she was thinking. He’d purposely misled her. And this time he had no excuse.

“I’m relieved this episode is over,” Ava Whittaker said. “It’s been a painful and trying period for all of us.”

“True, but if Ally continues to work at the DA’s Office,” Matt put in, “I guess we should all be prepared if she runs into another nut willing to take matters into his own hands.”

“Speaking of which, how long *do* you intend to keep going at the DA’s Office, Ally?” Noah asked.

Connor felt Allison tense next to him and saw Quent and Allison’s parents exchange looks.

“You know, Allison,” Ava said gently, as if knowing this was a sensitive subject, “you are at the point in your career when a lot of the Assistant DAs would be starting to think about their next job.”

James Whittaker cast his daughter a sober look. “And, under

the circumstances, you might want to think carefully about that.”

“What circumstances, Dad?” Allison asked. “This was an isolated case of one disturbed individual attempting to intimidate and harass me.” She shrugged. “It’s not as if it hasn’t happened to other prosecutors.”

Quentin cleared his throat and spoke up. “We were all worried sick about you.”

“Anyway, it’s not as if the Assistant DA’s job is the only potentially dangerous one in the world,” Allison went on. “Mom is a family judge, but I don’t see anyone here worried about one of the parties in her cases coming after her.”

“That’s because it hasn’t happened,” Quentin replied. “Whereas someone was firing bullets at you just a couple of weeks ago if you’ll recall.”

Connor sensed that Allison was reining in her temper with difficulty. “Maybe I want to rise through the ranks at the DA’s Office, has anyone thought about that?” she demanded.

He wasn’t known for his diplomacy, but Connor nevertheless decided it was probably time that he stepped in. “Maybe we’re not giving Allison the credit she’s due.”

Allison turned to look at him, the expression on her face saying she was wondering whether she’d heard him correctly.

Not glancing at her, he added, “I know I haven’t.”

“Thanks,” Allison said from beside him, her tone tinged with surprise.

He addressed himself to all the Whittakers, who were

exhibiting a range of emotions from quiet amusement to unmasked interest. “I’ve been with Allison night and day for the past several weeks,” he said, hoping the Whittakers didn’t take the “night and day” part too literally. “I’ve seen how tough she can be when the circumstances call for it.”

Noah guffawed. “I’ll say. And not just when the circumstances call for it, either.”

From the corner of his eye, Connor saw Allison purse her lips. Noah gave a mock shiver. “I rest my case.”

“The truth is,” Connor continued, “she refused to be cowed by the threats and she’s certainly got the guts to be a prosecutor.”

He looked at Allison, who was regarding him with questions in her eyes. He took a deep breath. “So, if Allison has set her sights on rising through the ranks at the DA’s Office, I say more power to her.”

Maybe it was because he’d finally acknowledged to himself that he loved her, but suddenly he was seeing the Whittakers through Allison’s eyes. Her family knew she’d been performing a tough job well at the DA’s Office, but none of them, it seemed, could get past some protective instincts where she was concerned.

And he’d been the most guilty of all. He’d unfairly been lumping her together with all the spoiled little rich girls he’d come to know, both through his security business and as an eligible and wealthy bachelor. It had been, he acknowledged, an easy way to keep her at an emotional distance and fight his

perverse attraction to her.

Allison's brothers and sister-in-law looked thoughtful, while Allison's parents appeared similarly reflective.

Matt was the first to speak. "Connor has a point. We've all been thinking of Ally as someone we love and want to protect. Maybe that's blinded us to how tough and resilient she really is."

"We just wanted to make sure you didn't get hurt, sweetheart," Allison's father said. "Our intention wasn't to stifle you, but things may have gotten a little confused along the way."

"Yes," Ava agreed. "I'm sorry if we've come across as a bit heavy-handed sometimes, Ally. It's only because we love you."

"I guess if we're handing out apologies," Quentin added, "I should say ditto for me."

"If continuing to be a prosecutor is really what you want to do, we'll support you, of course," Ava said, looking at her husband for his concurring nod. "Naturally, the decision is yours. All we wanted was to make sure it was a well thought out decision."

Allison smiled at her mother. "Thanks, Mom."

Connor caught the quick look she sent his way before she added, "And try not to worry too much. Thanks to Connor, I've learned that maybe I should have been paying more attention to my personal safety."

She'd learned that, had she? Connor took some satisfaction in that. It would help when he was out of her house—and out of her life—again.

As the last of the guests were leaving, Allison was in the

kitchen of her parents' house, packing up some food that the caterers had left behind. She looked up as her sister-in-law Liz approached.

"Hi," Liz said, picking up her purse and diaper bag from the kitchen counter. "Quentin and I were just about to depart." She stopped, giving Allison a searching look. "You look miserable."

"Thanks," she said wryly. She opened the refrigerator door and put some plastic containers inside.

Liz cocked her head as if contemplating something. "Which is surprising when you think about it. I mean, Kendall has been caught. You should be ecstatic."

She should be, but she wasn't. She almost felt sorry for Kendall. She supposed the embezzlement allowed him to maintain a high-flying lifestyle. Having been born into a wealthy and connected family, however, she could have told him that wealth and fame could sometimes be a gilded cage.

But what was really bothering her was Connor. He'd helped catch Kendall. He'd defended her to her family. And now he was getting out of her life.

She should have been thrilled. Wasn't that what she'd told him she wanted?

Yet, Liz was right. She was miserable.

"And, because you look miserable, let me return a favor," Liz continued.

"What?"

"Last year you helped me realize that I shouldn't give up on

Quentin, that Quentin loved me and all I needed to do was push a little more.” She smiled. “So, I’m trying to return the favor.”

Allison shrugged. “Thank you for making the effort, but, much as I hate to tell you, this is a whole different kettle of fish.”

Liz laughed. “No, it’s not. You just think it is because you’re too deeply involved in it. You’re exactly where I was last year.”

Allison stared at her friend for a second. Last year, after some prodding, Liz had admitted that she was in love with Quentin.

Liz was right. She herself wasn’t just in danger of falling in love with Connor. She was head-over-heels, irrevocably, no-holds-barred in love.

Yet, Connor had announced that he’d be moving out of the townhouse this weekend and she’d just nodded mutely. If he loved her, would he be leaving?

She’d discovered that he’d insisted on not being paid for his security services. And he’d stayed by her side despite her attempts to get rid of him and despite the fact that he had no obligation to do so. She wanted to believe that meant something...but was she reading too much into it?

Quentin walked into the kitchen. “There you are,” he said, giving his wife a gentle peck on the lips. “I’ve been looking for you. Are you ready to go?”

Liz smiled. “Yes, sorry to keep you waiting. Allison and I were just having a heart-to-heart.”

“Oh, yeah?” Quentin asked. “What about?”

“Connor,” Liz said simply.

“Ah.”

“What do you mean ‘ah’?” Allison asked. “And why did Connor insist on volunteering?”

Quentin looked amused. “That would be the million-dollar question, wouldn’t it?” he quipped. “God knows why. Maybe he’s a glutton for punishment.”

Allison gave him a nonplussed look.

In response, Quent just looked at her consideringly. “Why don’t you ask him?” he suggested finally.

“If I wanted to do that, I wouldn’t have asked you, would I?” she returned tartly.

Quentin grinned. “Chicken.”

She tossed her hair. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?” Quentin replied as he headed back toward the door. “I’ll be outside trying to pry the baby out of Mom’s arms so I can get him into his car seat.”

Soon after, Liz and Quentin departed the party, but not before Liz leaned in to whisper in her ear as they said goodbye, “Everything will be okay. You’ll see.”

On the drive back to Boston with Connor, Quentin’s words sounded in Allison’s head. *Why don’t you ask him?*

# Chapter Ten

Memorial Day. She should have been out playing with the rest of the world. Instead, she was in her kitchen, pretending to be doing...things.

The truth was, she was in the doldrums.

Connor was upstairs packing...despite the fact that so much remained unresolved between them. Despite the fact that she didn't want him to go.

A few weeks ago she would have said the idea was preposterous. But, a few weeks ago they hadn't been thrown together in the same house...they hadn't had wild and passionate sex...she hadn't fallen in love with him. He'd sneaked into her heart—if he'd ever left.

The fact that he'd refused to be paid to protect her gave her some small measure of hope. There would have been a time when she'd have seen his volunteering as further evidence that Connor was just as over-protective as her family. But given what she knew of him now, she thought it was just another way for him to show he cared.

Connor protected those he cared about. It went to the core of what he was. It went back to being the son of a police officer killed in the line of duty, back to funding community projects in his old neighborhood.

Of course, the fact that he viewed the Whittakers as a

substitute family could explain a lot about why he'd volunteered his services. He could simply have been doing her family a favor.

Yet, there was a part of her that refused to believe that was the whole explanation—at least, she hoped there was more to it. Because he hadn't only volunteered his company's services. Rather, he had insisted on protecting her himself when he could have delegated the task to someone on his staff, which would surely have been the logical thing to do since he probably had enough on his hands running his company.

When she'd thought Quentin was paying Connor for his services, she'd just assumed that her brother had insisted Connor take a personal hand in the matter. Instead, it had been Connor who had insisted. She liked to think it was because he cared about her, desired her...and more.

Quentin's question sounded in her head again. *Why don't you ask him?*

At a thump overhead, she looked up at the ceiling. Connor was up there packing and she was down here feeling all nervous and jittery. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach at the thought of the conversation she should be having with him, but inexplicable shyness made the task seem daunting.

Annoyed with herself, she threw down the dish towel she'd been absentmindedly using to wipe the kitchen counter.

As she went up, she thought about what she could say to him. It's suddenly occurred to me that I love you? Our relationship may be a mistake, but it's a mistake I want to spend the rest of

my life making?

Maybe she should just start with, don't go. *Don't go. Please don't go.*

She walked along the upstairs hallway and stopped at the open doorway to the spare bedroom. Connor was tossing some jeans into a suitcase. Her heart wrenched.

He looked tough and forbidding. And pulse-flutteringly gorgeous. In a pale blue T-shirt and jeans, he projected a casual sexiness.

He looked up and, when he saw her standing in the doorway, he paused for a second, folded T-shirts in hand, before resuming his packing. "If you've come to do a victory dance at seeing the back of me, you're a little early. I won't be ready to walk out the door for a while yet."

She rubbed sweaty palms on the cargo pants she was wearing and walked into the room. "That's not why I'm here."

"Really?" He stopped packing and looked up at her. "Then why are you here, petunia?"

She bit her lip and then folded her hands together in front of her. "To say thank you. And to apologize."

He raised an eyebrow. "Thank you for what?"

"For helping me." She took a deep breath. "For capturing Kendall." For defending me to my family. For making me love you.

"And what's the apology for?"

"For giving you a hard time along the way."

“That’s the second apology I’ve gotten from you in two weeks, princess.” His lips curled into a sardonic smile. “Must be a record.”

Despite her best intentions, she found herself becoming irritated by his taunting tone. And, frankly, it was easier to deal with him behind the shield of her annoyance. *Coward*. “What about the apology you owe me?” she demanded. “I haven’t heard any apology cross your lips, Rafferty.”

He sighed. “Okay, I’m going to play along here. Apology for what? Sleeping with you?”

Her lips tightened. “You purposely misled me about your security services. Quentin didn’t hire you. You volunteered.”

He folded his arms and nodded. “All right, I admit I’m guilty of doing that. I apologize. Is that all you came here to say?”

“Why?” she asked.

“Why what?”

“Why did you volunteer?”

He regarded her for a second before answering, his face inscrutable. “Just following through on what I told Quentin I’d do, which was beefing up your security.”

“No, I mean, why did you volunteer when Quentin could well have afforded to hire you? And why did you show up when you could have sent any number of the experts that Rafferty Security has on its payroll? Why did you insist on staying when you had no obligation to?” There, she’d gotten it out.

He unfolded his arms. “I think you know the answer to those

questions,” he said softly.

Her chin came up. “No, I don’t. Why don’t you enlighten me?”

“Have any theories suggested themselves?”

A quiver started in the pit of her stomach as he came closer. “You were doing a favor for a friend you consider to be practically family?”

He nodded, seeming to mull it over. “That would be a theory. Do you believe it?”

“Is it true?” she countered.

“No.”

She backed up, but he kept on coming.

“I wouldn’t say that was my major motivation, much as I like your family.”

She skirted the side of the bed and found herself with her back to the wall. “You must not like them that much then,” she said breathlessly.

He braced an arm against the wall near her head and caressed her cheek with the knuckles of his other hand. “Maybe I like you more.”

Her heart plummeted. Like, not love.

She shoved at his chest and started to stalk past him, but he grabbed her arm and whirled her around. She felt the wall at her back seconds before his lips came down on hers.

It was the way it always was between them. A heavy dose of wanting and need shot through her. Her sense of the world around them dulled even as she became sensitized to his every

touch...his lips molding hers...his body pressing against her.

She broke his hold on her to twine her arms around his neck, kissing him back with all the ardor she had kept pent up inside her.

As soon as he felt her willing response, he groaned and took the kiss deeper. His hands moved restlessly up and down her sides before one shimmied down her leg and then snaked around to cup her bottom and bring her flush up against him, letting her feel his erection. Finally, he tore his mouth from hers and they broke apart. They were both breathing heavily. He looked as if he still had half a mind to take up where they had just left off, which was, she realized, not far from how she was feeling.

He spoke first. "You are hands-down the most frustrating woman I've ever known, petunia."

"Same goes," she parried.

And then his face was devoid of its usual sardonically amused expression, and what she read there made her breath catch in her throat. "Are you going to make me say it, princess?" He paused, holding her gaze so that she couldn't look away. "The reason I volunteered is that the thought of anything happening to you tore me up inside. I wanted to rip to shreds the bastard who was terrorizing you."

"Connor—"

"No, let me finish," he said fiercely. "I may never be as polished as the guys down at the country club, but I have plenty of money these days. You'd have trouble spending all of it even

if you tried.”

She nodded. A giddy happiness was growing and spreading within her. Not about the money, but about the fact that he was laying his soul bare.

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