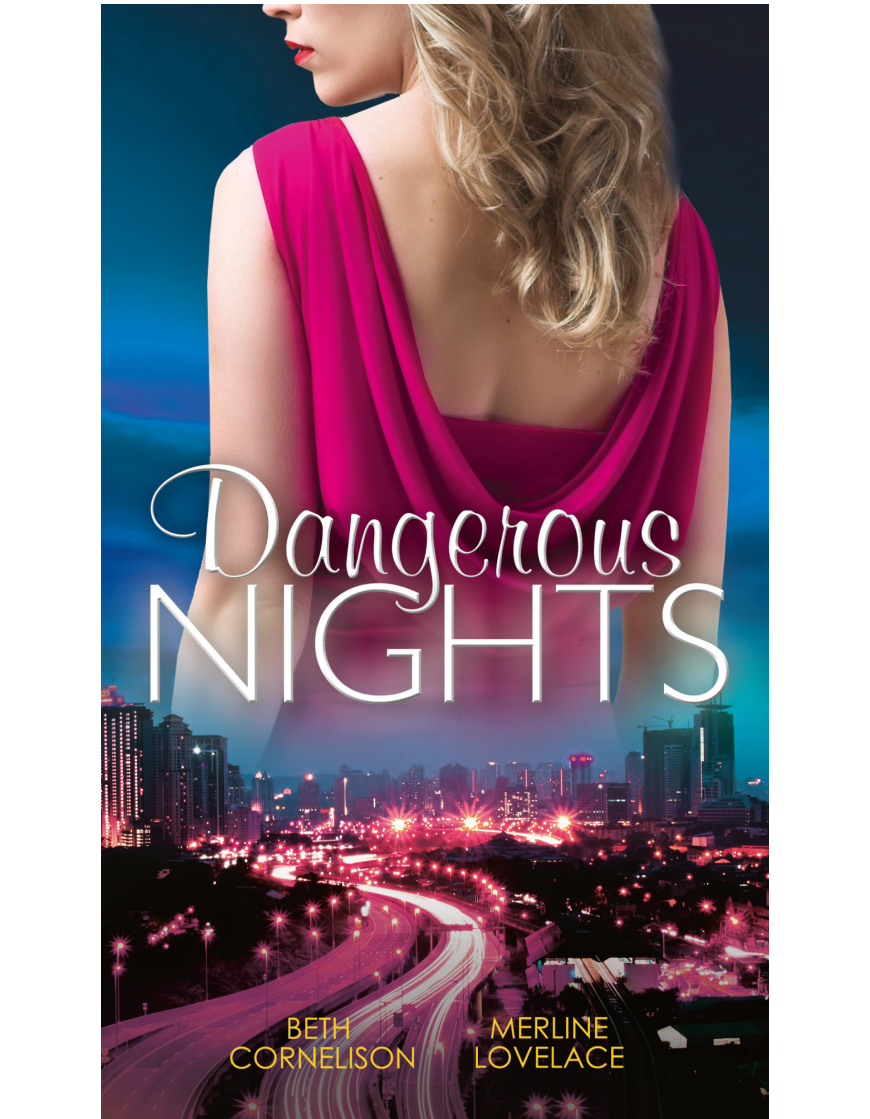


A woman with blonde hair, wearing a vibrant red sleeveless dress, is shown from the chest up, looking back over her right shoulder. The background is a nighttime cityscape with a highway in the foreground, illuminated by streetlights and city lights. The sky is a deep blue with some clouds.

Dangerous NIGHTS

BETH
CORNELISON

MERLINE
LOVELACE

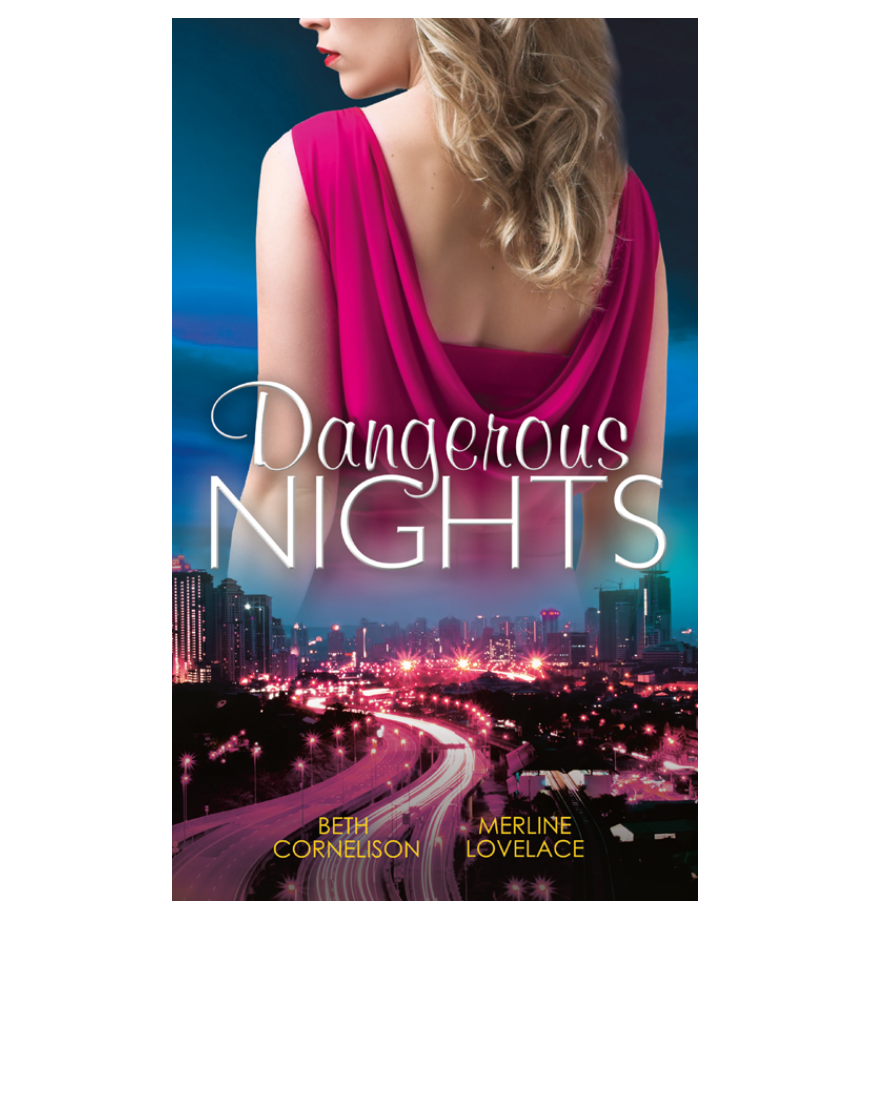
Merline Lovelace
Beth Cornelison
Dangerous Nights: Tall Dark
Defender / Undercover Wife

Аннотация

Holding out for a seriously hot heroPower Games...Rugged, protective Jonah barely knows Annie, but that doesn't stop him putting himself in the line of fire to save the pretty waitress from a ruthless killer. Convincing the stubborn single mum that she needs his protection 24/7 is a fiery battle of wills, as Annie struggles against having Jonah as her bodyguard. Succumbing to his charms, however, is another matter...and ProtectorsPretending to be Gillian's husband as part of a dangerous operation is undercover agent Mike's toughest assignment. Keeping his hands off the too-young, too-innocent new agent is almost impossible, especially when they're supposed to act like they're in love.But resisting temptation could be the only way to come home alive.

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A movie poster for 'Dangerous Nights'. The top half features a woman with blonde hair, seen from the back, wearing a vibrant red, sleeveless, draped dress. She is looking out over a city at night. The city skyline is illuminated with various lights, and a highway in the foreground shows light trails from cars. The title 'Dangerous NIGHTS' is written in a large, white, serif font, with 'Dangerous' in a script-like style and 'NIGHTS' in all caps. The names of the lead actors, Beth Cornelison and Merline Lovelace, are at the bottom in a yellow, sans-serif font.

Dangerous NIGHTS

BETH
CORNELISON

MERLINE
LOVELACE

Dangerous Nights
Tall Dark Defender
Beth Cornelison
Undercover Wife
Merline Lovelace



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Tall Dark Defender

About the Author

BETH CORNELISON started writing stories as a child when she penned a tale about the adventures of her cat, Ajax. A Georgia native, she received her bachelor's degree in public relations from the University of Georgia. After working in public relations for a little more than a year, she moved with her husband to Louisiana, where she decided to pursue her love of writing fiction.

Since that first time, Beth has written many more stories of adventure and romantic suspense and has won numerous honours for her work, including a coveted Golden Heart Award in romantic suspense from Romance Writers of America. She is active on the board of directors for the North Louisiana Storytellers and Authors of Romance (NOLA STARS) and loves reading, travelling, *Peanuts*' Snoopy and spending downtime with her family.

She writes from her home in Louisiana, where she lives with her husband, one son and two cats who think they are people. Beth loves to hear from her readers. You can write to her at PO Box 5418, Bossier City, LA 71171, USA, or visit her website at www.bethcornelison.com.

To my wonderful editor, Allison Lyons.

Thanks for all you do!

Chapter 1

The lights weren't supposed to be off.

Irritation, tinged with a tickle of uneasiness, skittered through Annie Compton. She fumbled in the predawn darkness to jab her key into the lock at Pop's Diner. Her boss, Peter Hardin, was supposed to have left the outside light on to deter burglars and to illuminate the front door for the employee who opened the diner in the morning. Today, Annie was said employee with the unenviable responsibility of showing up at 5:00 a.m.

She grumbled under her breath as she groped on the shadowed door to locate the lock's slot. The door moved unexpectedly. Just a fraction of an inch, but enough to catch Annie's attention. A bolted door shouldn't have wiggled that much.

Annie pulled the handle, and the heavy glass door swung open. Her pulse spiked. Turning on the front light wasn't all her boss had neglected when he closed the restaurant last night.

Gritting her teeth, she entered the diner and flipped on the overhead lights. The cold bluish-white glow of the fluorescent bulbs flooded the dining room.

"Hello? Mr. Hardin?" She scanned the empty restaurant cautiously. Listened. Waited. "Is anyone here?"

When she heard nothing, saw no one, she released the breath she held and crossed the floor. Annie stashed her purse behind the lunch counter, wishing she could call grouchy Mr. Hardin on

the carpet for his gaffes. Considering her boss had only criticism for her waitressing skills, she figured turnabout was fair play.

She huffed a humorless laugh as she plucked out a coffee filter and dropped it into the brewing basket. The man had left the diner unlocked, for crying out loud! Compared to exposing the restaurant to theft, her forgetting to refill the saltshakers was nothing.

Problem was, neglecting the saltshakers wasn't her worst mistake. Her gut clenching, she poured a carafe of water into the coffeemaker. She'd made her biggest blunder ever just a few nights before—a royal screwup that Hardin claimed had cost him two hundred thousand dollars. The amount seemed preposterous to her, but her boss insisted that was how much she'd lost him.

Annie's hands shook as she measured out the coffee grinds. She could never make up for losing Mr. Hardin so much money. She guessed she was lucky she still had her job, lucky he hadn't beaten her senseless the way Walt would have.

Thoughts of her violent ex-husband sent another shiver down her back. She rubbed the goose bumps on her arms and squared her shoulders. *Never again.*

If she had to work this dead-end waitress job the rest of her life, barely making ends meet for herself and her two young children, the price was worth her freedom from her abusive marriage. No man would ever hurt her or her children again.

Annie jabbed the power switch, and with a hiss and a waft of rich aroma, the morning java began dripping into the pot.

A glance around the diner showed numerous cleaning jobs that had been ignored at closing last night. She pressed her lips in a taut line of frustration. Perhaps this was part of her boss's plan to punish her for her colossal and costly mistake three nights earlier. Perhaps she deserved as much.

Two hundred thousand dollars. Acid bit her gut. How could she ever make up for that mistake?

Sighing her resignation, she took a clean rag from the cabinet and headed to the kitchen for a bucket of soapy water to start cleaning tables.

She noticed the foul odor as soon as she stepped through the swinging door from the dining room. Wrinkling her nose, she flipped the lights on and checked for some food item that might have been left out to spoil. But not even rotten milk smelled this bad.

Coupled with the unlocked front door, the putrid scent gave her pause. Too many things seemed off-kilter at the diner this morning.

A ripple of apprehension shimmied through her. Annie hesitated by the main grill, which still sported last night's grease.

"Mr. Hardin, are you there?" She heard the quiver of fear in her tone and pressed a hand to her swirling stomach. "Hello?"

She took a few baby steps forward, scanning the dirty kitchen. Rounding the industrial-size freezer, she crept into the back hall.

On the floor, a pair of feet jutted through the open door to the manager's office.

Annie gasped. Dear heavens! Had he fallen? Had a heart attack?

“Mr. Hardin!” she cried, rushing forward.

When she reached the office door, Annie drew up short.

Her breath froze in her lungs. Bile surged to her throat. Black spots danced at the edge of her vision.

Peter Hardin lay in a puddle of blood, his eyes fixed in a blank, sightless stare. Two bullet holes pocked his chest, and a third marred his forehead.

Annie stumbled backward, horror clogging her throat.

Numb, shaking, light-headed, she edged away from her grisly discovery.

Shock and denial finally yielded to terror. A scream wrenched from her throat and echoed in the empty kitchen.

Her boss was dead. Murdered.

And though she hadn't pulled the trigger, Annie was certain Hardin's murder was her fault.

Three days earlier

He'd stalked his prey long enough. Time to move in for the kill.

Over the rim of his coffee cup, Jonah Devereaux eyed the rotund, balding man across the Formica table from him.

Martin Farrout.

Everything Jonah had learned to date in his investigation told him Farrout was the muscle of the gambling operation, the gatekeeper. Getting past Farrout, rooting out the players up the

chain of command was what the past six months had been about.

“Mark my words. Kansas will go all the way,” Ted Pulliam, one of Farrout’s lackeys, said, jabbing the diner’s table with his finger for emphasis.

Jonah grunted and lowered his coffee. “North Carolina. They’re a powerhouse with a winning legacy to uphold.”

Pulliam scoffed. “All right, Devereaux, put your money where your mouth is.” The wiry man with faded tattoos slapped a Jackson on the table. “Twenty bucks. And I’ll give you five points.”

Jonah schooled his face and divided a bland look between Pulliam and Farrout, sizing them up. Weighing his decision to push his investigation to the next level.

He drained the cold dregs of his coffee and shoved the mug to the end of the table. In seconds, their waitress had snagged the coffeepot and stepped over to refill his cup.

Lifting a hand, Jonah waved her off. “Naw, I’m done, Annie. Thanks anyway.”

“Gentlemen, we close in ten minutes. Can I get you anything else?” the attractive brunette asked as she cleared away the dirty mug.

Sure. I’ll take an order of inside information about the local gambling ring with a side of details on the money-laundering operation I suspect your boss is running. Hold the onions.

If only it were that easy.

Instead, he’d spent months investigating the illegal activities

he'd traced to Pop's Diner, and he still didn't have the evidence he needed to resolve the case and turn his information over to the local police.

The evidence he needed to give Michael justice.

Pushing aside thoughts of his mentor, Jonah flashed Annie a quick smile. "Just my bill."

While posing as a paper-mill worker who'd recently moved to the area, Jonah had eaten enough greasy meals at the small diner to send his cholesterol count into the stratosphere—a lesser-known hazard of undercover work that'd take countless hours in the gym to rectify. At least the coffee was good. God knew he'd guzzled enough of the brew at Pop's to last a lifetime.

But over the weeks, his regular meals at Pop's had gained him the level of familiarity with the locals he needed to loosen a few tongues and open a door or two. Things were finally beginning to fall into place.

He shifted his gaze to Farrout and pitched his voice low. "I want the real action. Five grand on UNC to win it all."

Pulliam fell silent and sat back in the booth.

Farrout lifted a thick black eyebrow. One taut second ticked after another, the tension screwing Jonah's gut into a tight knot. Unflinching, he held the portly man's stare.

Finally, Farrout narrowed his eyes to slits. "Ten."

Jonah sighed, pretending to consider the higher stakes. He couldn't seem too eager or too free with his cash. The working-class stiff he was supposed to be wouldn't have ten thousand

dollars to lose on a careless bet. Not that *he* had that kind of money to lose, either.

He rubbed his thumb idly on the handle of his spoon and glanced out the plate-glass window to the night-darkened street. “That’s pretty steep.”

Farroul shrugged lazily. “I gotta know if you’re for real or if you’re just wasting my time. First bet is always ten grand, minimum.”

Pulliam twisted his lips into a taunting grin. “How sure are you of UNC now?”

Keeping a stoic face, Jonah drummed his fingers on the table in an intentional display of nerves. “I can go eight now, two more next payday.”

Farroul’s fleshy lips twitched. “Deal.”

Annie returned with separate checks for the three men. When she reached for Farroul’s plate, he grabbed her wrist with his meaty hand and squeezed. “Did I say I was through?”

Wincing, Annie gave Farroul a wide-eyed glance. “I’m sorry. I just thought—”

Fury burned inside Jonah, and he stiffened. “Let go of her.”

The barrel-chested man returned a cold stare. “Butt out, Devereaux.”

Jonah gritted his teeth. “Let. Go.”

Annie’s cheeks had drained of color, and her dark eyes rounded with apprehension.

A muscle jumped in Farroul’s jaw, but he released Annie with

an angry thrust. “Watch yourself, Devereaux. I don’t like people sticking their nose where it don’t belong.”

Hell. He didn’t need to blow his investigation by pissing Farrout off. But he damn well wouldn’t sit by and let him rough up a woman, either. He’d done that too often as a kid when his dad was in one of his moods, and the guilt still ate at him.

Annie rubbed her offended wrist and cast a quick, curious glance at Jonah before hurrying back to the lunch counter.

Over the months he’d been working the case, he’d gotten to know all of the waitresses by name. Annie was the most reticent of the waitstaff, but she was also the most intriguing. Though attentive and polite to a fault, she was far less inclined to engage in good-natured banter and flirting the way the other servers did. An air of mystery surrounded her, partly because of her shyness, partly because she wore her silky dark tresses in a style reminiscent of the sultry movie stars of the 1940s—parted on the side with a curtain of hair covering one cheek.

Jonah had caught a glimpse of that hidden cheek once and seen the scars she was concealing. Those scars added to the enigma that was Annie but, in his opinion, didn’t detract from her pretty face. Clearly she thought otherwise, or she wouldn’t work so hard to hide the jagged pink lines.

As Jonah dug his wallet out of his back pocket, Farrout and Pulliam slid out of the booth and sauntered to the counter with their checks.

“Put it on my tab, doll face,” Farrout said, tossing his ticket

on the counter and turning to leave.

Pulliam added his bill and clicked his tongue. "Ditto."

Annie's brow furrowed, and she shook her head. "But ... we don't—"

The men ignored her as they walked out, chortling to themselves.

From the booth, Jonah seethed over the men's rudeness. He studied Annie's crestfallen expression, her drooping shoulders and moue of disgust. She slapped the counter with the rag in her hand and huffed loudly.

When she raised her gaze to him, he quickly shifted his attention to his bill and pulled a twenty out of his wallet. He rose from the bench seat and approached the counter where she wiped up the day's mess with more vigor than necessary.

Extending the ticket and cash to her, he smiled ruefully. "Keep the change."

She glanced at the money and frowned. "But all you had was coffee."

He lifted a shoulder as he returned his wallet to his pocket. "Maybe I want to help your day end on a positive note."

Annie gaped at him as if she didn't know what to make of his kindness. As if she'd never encountered generosity before. "But —"

"Annie!" Peter Hardin, the manager of the diner and Jonah's key suspect in the money-laundering scheme, burst through the swinging kitchen door.

Jonah saw Annie tense as her linebacker-size boss stalked over to her.

“I need you to do an errand for me.” Hardin slapped a bulky tan envelope on the counter.

Annie’s face fell, and she glanced at her watch. “Now? It’s almost midnight.”

Jonah took his time putting on his jacket, unabashedly eavesdropping on the exchange. Annie’s distress around her boss piqued his curiosity.

“Yes, now. This has to be delivered to Fourth Street in the next half hour. It’s extremely important, so don’t be late with it. Guard this envelope with your life.”

Jonah clenched his teeth. Fourth Street was a notoriously bad section of town. This time of night, the area was downright dangerous. What was Hardin thinking, sending a woman on an errand alone in that part of town?

“But—” Annie hesitated, chewing her lip as if debating the wisdom of arguing with her boss. “If it’s so important, why aren’t you delivering it?”

Hardin glared at her. “I have my reasons. You want a job tomorrow, you deliver that package on time. Got it?”

Annie opened and closed her mouth in dismay, then nodded. Her boss handed her a scrap of paper and hitched his head toward the front door. “That’s the address and the name of the guy you give the package to. *Only* to him. No one else. Got it? Now, go on. I’ll close up.”

After fishing her purse out from under the counter, Annie tucked the package against her chest with a sigh.

Jonah watched her leave the diner and walk past the parking lot without stopping. He frowned. She didn't have a car? Walking Fourth Street alone at night could be suicide.

Without giving it a second thought, Jonah fell in step behind Annie. Peter Hardin might not care about his waitress's safety, but Jonah wasn't about to let Annie make that delivery unprotected.

Annie's footsteps reverberated in the dark shadows looming around her. Alone on the downtown street, she clutched the manila envelope to her chest like a shield.

She shouldn't be here. This part of town was dangerous, especially at this late hour. But how could she refuse her boss's order? She couldn't afford to lose her job. She only had a few more minutes left to make Hardin's delivery, and he had been emphatic about the deadline—and the dire consequences if anything happened to the mysterious contents.

Just make the drop and get out of there. Get home. Get safe.

The sound of her shallow breathing rasped a harsh cadence in the quiet March night, and her heartbeat drummed in her ears like a death knell. She slowed her frantic pace, closing her eyes long enough to gather her composure.

Keep your wits and don't blow this.

The drop-off address had to be close. She searched for numbers on the buildings, but the dilapidated storefronts and

graffiti-decorated buildings bore no identification.

She gritted her teeth. Damn Peter Hardin for forcing her to do this dangerous errand! If she didn't need her job so much, she'd have told him where to stick his order to do his dirty work. She sighed in disgust, wishing she'd stood up to Hardin.

But she'd always been a pushover. Her ex-husband had known it and taken advantage of that truth.

Squaring her shoulders, Annie kept walking, realizing how this decrepit neighborhood was a reflection of her life. Lonely, scarred and struggling to survive.

She'd had the typical fairy-tale dreams for herself as a girl—love and marriage, happily ever after. Instead she'd found a nightmare—fear and abuse, divorce from a man now serving time for a laundry list of crimes. After six years of unhappiness, at least she was free of Walt. Her job as a waitress at Pop's Diner barely covered her bills, but her children were safe now. She was safe. That was all that truly mattered.

Yet as she searched for some evidence of where to take the package, she felt anything but safe. A prick of alarm nipped her neck. Though she heard nothing, saw no one, the uneasy sense that someone was following her crawled over her like a cockroach on her skin. She shuddered.

Annie drew a deep breath for courage, her nose filling with the stench of sewage, mildew and despair.

A scuffling noise filtered through the night from an alley just ahead of her. Her steps faltered. Her pulse jumped.

“H-hello?” she called, her voice cracking.

A hulking figure emerged from the black void. The man descended on her before a scream could form in her throat. He wrapped arms of steel around her, and a fleshy palm covered her nose and mouth. Lifting her as if she weighed nothing, her attacker pulled her into the dark alley and slammed her against a brick wall.

The collision knocked the air from her lungs. Shock and fear froze her limbs.

No! her brain screamed. *Not again!* Slow-motion images of her past flickered before her mind’s eye.

“You call this slop dinner?” Walt’s hand cracked against her chin in an upward arc.

Her assailant seized the manila envelope she’d sworn on her life she’d deliver only to Joseph Nance.

Panic surged inside her. Her fingers curled into the package, clinging to it for all she was worth. “No!”

“Give me the money, bitch!” he growled. His fist crashed into her mouth, and a metallic taste slid over her tongue.

Red smears stained the floor. Blood. Her blood.

Walt kicked her in the ribs, and crimson drops leaked from her nose and splashed onto the linoleum.

The man’s beefy fingers bit her flesh. He shook her. “Give it to me, or I’ll kill you!”

Past and present twined around each other. Numbed her. She did what experience had taught her was her best defense. She

shut down. Drew into herself. Closed her eyes.

Just endure it. Survive.

Her grip slackened, and the package was ripped from her arms.

Chapter 2

With a frightened cry, Annie slid to the ground, raised her arms to protect her head. Through the haze of her terror, she heard the shuffle of feet. A grunt. A curse.

Opening her eyes a slit, she found a second man in the alley, brawling hand-to-hand with her attacker.

Touching her swollen lip, she scooted farther away from the men who battled in the shadowed alley. She cringed as the newly arrived man landed a solid blow to her attacker's gut. Her assailant responded with a resounding punch to the other man's jaw.

Annie curled into a ball, trembling as fists flew. She squeezed her eyes shut and plugged her ears. She'd seen and heard enough violence in recent months to last her a lifetime. Her ex-husband's abuse was an all-too-present memory that haunted her every day.

Hot tears leaked onto her cheeks, and she conjured a image of her children, Haley and Ben. She prayed she'd survive to see them again. *Please, God.*

Her kids were all that mattered. The reason she worked the exhausting waitress job at the diner. Her reason to persevere. Her reason for leaving Walt sixteen months ago, despite the horrifying weeks that followed as her abusive ex hunted her, terrorized her, nearly killed her.

A loud, pained shout jolted her out of her protective shell, and

she peeked out at the scene unfolding before her. Her assailant was on the ground, the second man rubbing his knuckles. As he stepped back from his opponent, the second man moved through a shaft of light from a streetlamp.

And Annie glimpsed a face she knew from the diner. A regular.

Her gasp drew the man's attention.

She searched her memory for his name. John? Jacob? No — *Jonah*.

"Annie, are you all right?"

In those few seconds of Jonah's distraction, her assailant snatched up the envelope and ran from the alley.

"The package!" Panic wrenched Annie's chest.

Jonah pursued the thief to the end of the alley but apparently decided against a footrace. Instead, he walked back toward Annie, wiping blood from his nose with the sleeve of his shirt. "Are you hurt?"

"He took the envelope," she said, her voice quivering. A sinking disappointment crushed her chest. Though grateful to be alive and to have had Jonah's help, she dreaded what Hardin would do when he discovered she'd lost his package. Peter Hardin was no gentleman, and she doubted he'd be forgiving about her screwup. She buried her face in her hands as fresh tears puddled in her eyes. "He's going to fire me. I know he is. Oh, God ..."

Jonah crouched in front of her, and she jolted when he stroked a hand down her arm.

Raising a wary gaze, she scrunched a few inches farther away from him. He may have scared the mugger off, but she'd seen his skill with his fists. Experience had taught her to give violent men a wide berth.

"Hey, come on now." The low, soothing rumble of his voice lulled her. "You won't lose your job. It's not your fault you were mugged." His dark eyebrows drew into a frown, and his tone hardened. "If anyone is to blame it's that bastard Hardin for sending a woman into this neighborhood alone in the middle of the night."

Jonah flexed and balled his hand. Annie's mouth dried, the stolen envelope temporarily forgotten as she focused on the more immediate threat—the man fisting his hand before her.

Taking a deep breath, she eyed Jonah's clenched fist. "Why are you here?"

He cocked his head slightly and lifted a corner of his mouth. "I'd have thought that was obvious. I followed you when you left the diner."

So her sense had been right. Her pulse sped up. "Why? What do you want?"

He raised his hands, palms out. "I only wanted to keep an eye on you. I figured something like this might happen and ..." He sighed. "I'm only sorry it took me so long to catch up once the jerk grabbed you. I should have stayed closer, but I didn't want to spook you if you saw me following you."

Annie furrowed her brow skeptically. "So you were following

me to ... *protect* me?"

He grunted. "I heard Hardin tell you to make the delivery, knew the neighborhood ..." He glanced away for a moment and swiped at the blood beading under his nose again. "I oughta wring the jerk's neck for putting you at risk this way."

"No!"

Her vehement protest snapped his gaze back to hers. "Oh, I won't. I'm not interested in being arrested for assault." He held his hand out to her. "Can I help you up?"

Annie hesitated, staring at his large hand. His knuckles were swollen and raw, his palm toughened by calluses. That hand had packed a powerful punch to her assailant.

"Annie?"

Her gaze darted up to his. In the harsh shaft of light from the streetlamp, she studied his face. His bloody nose had a bump at the bridge, as if it had been broken before. A thin, silvery scar bisected his dark eyebrow, and a red blotch on his jaw hinted at a future bruise, courtesy of her attacker.

Yet despite all these visible signs of past and recent fights, his lopsided grin and warm green eyes spoke of a softer side to this man.

"Keep the change."

"Let go of her."

Did she dare trust him? He *had* come to help her. Or so he said.

"If you wanted to protect me ..." She paused, second-guessing

the wisdom of challenging him on his story. Challenging Walt had earned her more than one beating.

“Go on.”

She took a fortifying breath. “Well, why not just walk *with* me? Why follow me?”

He rubbed a hand over his battered jaw. “Fair question.” He tugged up the corner of his mouth. “If I had offered to walk with you or drive you to the drop-off address, would you have accepted?”

“I—” She lifted her chin. “Well ... probably not. All I know about you is that you like lots of milk in your coffee—skim, not whole—and that you usually sit at the counter. First seat, facing the door.”

His grin was a tad smug. “That’s what I thought.” He offered his hand again.

This time, after a brief hesitation, Annie placed her hand in his and let him pull her to her feet. The warmth and strength of his fingers, curled around hers, sent an odd shiver through her. How could a touch be both comforting and unnerving at the same time? The size of his hand, swallowing her smaller one, sent a tingling awareness through her. His height dwarfed her five feet four inches, and he had more strength in one arm than she had in her whole body. Like Walt had.

Jonah had the power and skill to crush her if he chose.

Her stomach did a forward roll. Snatching her hand back, she rubbed her arms, hoping to warm the chill that burrowed to her

bones.

“Did he hurt you, Annie? I can take you to the emergency room if—”

“No! I—I’m fine. Really.” *I’ve taken far worse.*

Uncomfortable under his scrutiny, she averted her gaze, tried to collect her thoughts. “I ... I guess I should call the police. File a report.”

Jonah’s eyes narrowed, and he rubbed his jaw. “Uh, generally yes. But ... I’d rather you didn’t.”

Her gaze snapped up to his. “Why not? He took Mr. Hardin’s package. He said the package was important and—”

“The guy is long gone.”

“But the cops need to know! I was attacked, and ... maybe they can find the package before—”

Before Peter Hardin finds out the envelope was stolen. Fear seized her lungs, and she struggled for a breath. “Oh, God,” she wheezed.

“Annie?” Concern knit Jonah’s brow as she leaned against the bricks and gasped for air.

“H-Hardin ... will kill me. H-he’s ... going to hate me. H-he ...”

Jonah stroked a hand over her back. “Calm down, Annie. It’ll be all right. Hardin can’t blame you for this.”

She angled her head to glance up at him and scoffed. “You don’t know him very well.” She bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling. “I don’t have a cell phone. I’ll have to wait until I get

home to report this ... Unless you—”

Jonah was shaking his head. “Annie, I know you have no reason to trust me, but ... I need you not to call the cops about this.”

Annie frowned. “Wha— Why?”

“I have my reasons. I know that’s not much to go on, but it’s all I can say now.” He scowled and ducked his head. “Please, Annie. I need you to trust me on this.”

Trust him? She barely knew him. And trust was one thing she had little of when it came to men. Walt had destroyed what little trust she had. But to get away from him, to get out of this deserted alley and get home to her kids, she’d promise anything.

“All right. No cops.” *Yet.* She reserved the right to change her mind once she was safe at home.

With his mouth in a grim line, he gave a tight nod. Jonah swept his gaze over her, then stepped back. “I can at least walk you back to the diner parking lot.”

“I don’t have a car. Can’t afford one.” Annie lifted her chin, determined not to feel any embarrassment for her financial woes. She had no reason to be ashamed.

“Mmm. That’s kinda what I figured when you didn’t drive here. How did you plan on getting home?”

She scooped her purse off the ground. “Same way I got here. Walking. Usually I take the bus home. But on nights when I work late, the bus is no longer running.”

Jonah heaved a sigh. “Well, my truck is back near the diner

if you'd like a ride."

Annie adjusted the purse strap on her shoulder, steeling herself for the long walk home. "No. Thank you."

He scowled. "You know I'm going to follow you, regardless."

Her heart gave a kick, and her muscles tightened. Walt had disregarded her wishes, too. Done as he damned well pleased, whenever, whatever. She'd felt powerless.

The last thing she needed was another controlling man dictating her life. Especially one who clearly was no stranger to violence. But how did she refuse without incurring his wrath? How did she impose her will on a man whose mind was obviously set?

With the flutter of ill-ease in her veins, Annie backed toward the street. She cleared her throat to steady her voice before replying, faking the confidence she hoped she projected. "I ... appreciate your help earlier, but I can get home by myself."

He rubbed his hands on the seat of his jeans, shaking his head. "It's late, Annie. The streets in this part of town are dangerous—as you've discovered."

She shivered, remembering the instant terror when she'd been grabbed. Her arm still throbbed from her attacker's viselike grip. Defeat settled in her belly like a rock, followed closely by a surge of desperation. How would she explain the lost package to Hardin? Was she destined to be a victim of men's violence for the rest of her life?

Not a victim, Annie. You're a survivor. Stay positive. Attitude

is everything. The mantras and platitudes Ginny, her counselor from the women's center, preached echoed in her brain. But on days like today, keeping a rosy outlook took more energy than she had. She'd dealt with grumpy customers, poor tippers and a demanding boss. She'd been on her feet since noon, spilled coffee on a customer who then threatened to sue and had had her life endangered thanks to a boss who would likely fire her for losing his package.

Annie shoved aside the sense of impending disaster and squared her shoulders as she faced Jonah. "I can't stop you from following me, but I prefer to get home by my own means."

Jonah ducked his head, his mouth twisted in a frown of disagreement. "Fine. I won't argue with you." He shook his head and huffed his frustration. "But if you change your mind, give a shout. I'll be just a block or so behind you."

The cocky lift of his eyebrow dared her to try to stop him from tailing her. He stepped back to let her pass, and she marched toward the street, squeezing her purse to her chest and giving the dark downtown avenue a wary scrutiny.

A queasy jitter roiled in her gut, knowing she'd disappointed him, upset him. Her innate need to please, an instinct Walt had exploited and pushed to an unhealthy extreme, caused her a moment's hesitation. She almost balked, almost relented.

When she'd risked her life to free herself from Walt, she'd vowed to never depend on a man for anything ever again. Rebuilding her life, her confidence, her inner strength was a

daily struggle. Old habits and emotions, ingrained in her during six turbulent years of marriage, died hard. But she'd sworn to shed the debilitating attitudes and knee-jerk reactions from her marriage in favor of strength and self-empowerment.

One day at a time.

She could take care of herself and her children, no matter what. She hated that she needed the job Hardin gave her so desperately, but without a college degree, her employment options were limited.

She glanced behind her a time or two as she made her way home, and each time, Jonah gave a nod as if to say, "Yep. I'm still here."

She sensed Jonah's stare like a weight on her back as she crossed the parking lot and climbed the outside iron stairs to her second-floor apartment. On the grillwork landing, she lifted her gaze and found him in the lawn below. She flicked her hand, shooing him away.

Crossing his arms over his broad chest, he nodded to her door.

Sighing, she unlocked the door and pushed it open an inch. Again she flicked her fingers, sending him away. His lopsided grin flashed white under the bluish light of the security lamp, and he waved. Only when she turned to go inside did he finally amble off in the direction they'd come.

She parted the sheers on the kitchen window to make sure he really left, didn't loiter in the parking lot or try to come up the stairs to her door. His loose-limbed stride mirrored the relaxed

confidence she'd come to know when she waited on him at the diner. He poked his hands into the pockets of his jeans, and for an instant, she admired the way his clothes fit his taut, muscular body.

"Miss Annie?"

The young voice jarred her from the intimate perusal of Jonah's physique, a side trip she had no business making. Clapping a hand over her scampering heartbeat, she faced her babysitter. "Rani, I ... Sorry I'm late. My boss had me run an errand after I got off."

"It's okay. I was just watching TV. I—" Rani paused, wrinkling her brow. "Gosh, what happened to your lip?"

Annie touched her swollen mouth. She'd almost forgotten about the blow the mugger had landed, splitting her lip. "Nothing really. I'll be fine. Just a little accident," she lied out of habit.

She'd gotten good at making up explanations for the injuries Walt had inflicted.

She was a klutz. The baby had bumped her nose with his head. She'd tripped over a toy in the dark. Her babysitter frowned but said nothing else about Annie's injury.

"Come on." Annie hitched her head toward the back of the apartment. "Let's get you your check." She paused at the door to the kids' bedroom and peeked in.

Ben slept soundly in his crib with his diapered butt poking in the air, and curled in her bed, Haley clutched her stuffed cat, Tom, under one arm.

A tightness squeezed Annie's chest as love filled her heart to bursting. Quietly, she stepped into the room and adjusted Ben's blanket to cover his arms, then crouched to stroke Haley's long, dark hair. Her daughter stirred, and Annie held her breath, hoping she hadn't woken Haley with her motherly doting. She tiptoed back out the door and turned toward her bedroom where she kept her checkbook.

After scribbling out Rani's weekly payment, she walked the teenager to the door.

"You still need me at eleven thirty tomorrow morning?"

Rani Ogitani had graduated from high school the previous May and started babysitting for Annie the following summer. Now, ten months later, Rani claimed to be looking for a job, thinking about college, weighing her options, but seemed content watching Annie's children and living with her mother for the time being.

"Yeah. Eleven thirty. The kids give you any trouble today? I know Ben can be a handful."

Rani yawned. "They were okay. Mom says Ben's crankiness is just his age. Typical terrible twos."

Annie grinned. "This, too, shall pass."

"Hmm?"

"Something my grandmother used to say. Never mind." She held the door open for Rani and stood on the landing to watch as the teenager crossed the parking lot to her mother's first-floor apartment.

The March evening still held a nip of the winter just past, and goose bumps rose on Annie's arms. Before stepping back inside, she scanned the yard, the parking area, the street. Jonah was gone. Or at least she couldn't see him anywhere, if he was hiding, watching.

She shook her head. That was paranoia talking. Walt's legacy.

Or was it? Jonah had followed her when she left to make her delivery for Mr. Hardin. Was he really just being thoughtful and protective? Why had he asked her not to call the cops? Was he her guardian angel—or was Jonah hiding a dangerous secret?

Chapter 3

The next day, Jonah took his place at the lunch counter at Pop's Diner as he had nearly every day for the past several months. With luck, he'd only have to subject himself to the diner's menu another couple of weeks. As he followed through with the bet he'd placed with Farrout the night before, he hoped he now had an inside track to learn more about how the illegal gambling operation worked—how gamblers paid their debts, where the money went, who was involved at higher levels.

Follow the money.

He thought about the package Annie had been given to deliver last night, and tension spiraled through him. He'd bet anything Hardin's package had to do with the gambling money he was laundering through the diner. Whoever had been on the other end of that delivery was a key player in this operation.

Jonah gritted his teeth. He'd been so close to filling in another piece of the puzzle in this investigation before that bastard had jumped Annie and made off with the package.

It almost seemed as if the guy had been lying in wait for her. As if he'd known that package was to be delivered

Jonah puffed his cheeks and blew a slow, thoughtful breath out through puckered lips. Who could have tipped the thief off? Where was the leak in the operation? Was someone gunning for Hardin?

Nothing about last night's turn of events sat well with Jonah, especially when he figured Annie into the picture. Hardin had drawn her into the dynamic. She could have unwittingly become ensnared in the sticky web of deceit Hardin and Farrout had spun.

Jonah mulled his next move, then glanced up from his ham on rye when Annie breezed through the front door at ten minutes until noon. She cast him a quick nervous glance as she poked her purse under the counter and rushed back into the kitchen.

Jonah swabbed another greasy fry through his puddle of ketchup, keeping an eye on the kitchen door. Waiting.

Moments later he heard Hardin's raised voice roll from the back of the restaurant like thunder announcing a storm. "You *lost* it? You idiot! I told you how important that package was! How could you *lose* it?"

Jonah craned his neck, trying to find Annie through the service window.

He heard the soft murmur of Annie's response, recognized the frightened tremble in her tone, and his gut pitched.

"Sorry's not good enough!" Hardin screamed.

A loud crash. Annie's frightened yelp.

In an instant, Jonah had jumped from his stool and barreled through the swinging door into the kitchen. He sized up the situation in a glance. Hardin's red face, balled fists and threatening pose as he leaned close to Annie. The young waitress had scrunched back against the wall, her face pale and arms raised defensively to protect her head.

“Is there a problem here?”

Hardin’s glare snapped over to Jonah. “What are you doin’? Can’t you read? Employees only!”

“Annie? You all right?” he asked, ignoring Hardin.

Frightened brown eyes lifted at his inquiry.

Hardin jabbed a finger toward the door. “This ain’t none of your business!”

“I’m making it my business. I don’t take kindly to any man threatening a woman.”

Annie’s brow furrowed warily.

“The bitch lost two hundred grand of my money!” Hardin growled.

Annie gasped, and her eyes widened. “Two hundred grand!”

Hardin narrowed a glare on her. “That’s right. Two hundred grand. And it’s comin’ out of your paycheck!”

Her face blanched a shade whiter. “Mr. Hardin, I can’t—”

“Shut up!” He slammed a hand on the wall beside her head, and she yelped, trembled.

Jonah’s blood boiled, and he strode closer to Hardin. Grabbing the man’s shirt, he yanked him around, then shoved him back against the opposite wall. “Back off! If I see you so much as breathe on her again, I’ll tear you apart.”

Hardin puffed his chest out and shoved back. “Don’t threaten me! She’s my employee and—”

“That doesn’t give you the right to hurt or intimidate her,” Jonah growled through clenched teeth. “Don’t touch her. Ever.”

“Jonah ...” Annie said quietly. “Don’t.”

“If anyone is to blame for that money being stolen from her, it’s *you*.” Jonah poked the man in the chest with his finger. “You had no business sending a woman into that neighborhood alone, especially at that hour. What were you thinking? She could have been killed.” He took a deep breath to calm the rage seething inside him. The urge to smash the guy’s face was too strong. He needed to step back, cool off. He released Hardin’s shirt and moved away, his hands still bunched at his sides.

Hardin’s eyes narrowed, and his face flamed red. “Get out of my kitchen! Out of my diner!” He turned to Annie, aiming a finger at her. “And you! You’re fired!”

Annie bit her bottom lip and squeezed her eyes shut.

Jonah moved between Annie and her hostile boss. “Not so fast, pal. Unless you’d like to explain to the cops what that two-hundred-grand delivery was about, where the money came from.”

Now he had Hardin’s attention. The man’s eyes widened, and his face leached of color.

“She can file a wrongful termination lawsuit whether she has grounds or not, and the delivery you asked her to make is sure to be called into question. You got an explanation ready for the judge about that two hundred grand?”

Tensing, Hardin glared darkly at Jonah, then cast his glower toward Annie.

Jonah held his breath, second-guessing his rash challenge.

Tossing down the gauntlet with Hardin might not have been his wisest move if he wanted to keep a low profile as he worked his investigation.

But Hardin, in his rage, had spilled the tidbit about the huge sum that had been in the package. Hardin knew Jonah had been at the diner last night when Annie left to deliver the envelope. And Jonah couldn't help but wonder if his intervention now hadn't provoked Hardin to fire Annie.

Guilt pinched Jonah. He couldn't let her lose her job because of his temper.

"Fine," Hardin snarled, spittle spraying Annie's direction. "Consider yourself on notice. You screw up again, and you're gone."

With another scolding glance to Jonah, Hardin stomped into his office and slammed the door.

Annie pressed a hand to her chest and slid to the floor, shaking.

Pulling in a deep breath for composure before he approached her, Jonah studied Annie's trembling body and wan expression. He'd seen reactions like hers too many times in both his personal and professional life not to know what he was dealing with. If her fearful reaction to Hardin weren't enough, her scars and her distrust of him last night bolstered his assessment.

She'd likely been abused. Husband, father, sibling—didn't matter who. The devastating legacy of violence and mental cruelty didn't differentiate.

Acid roiled in his gut, and he took another couple of seconds to cool off before squatting in front of her.

“Annie—”

“You shouldn’t have gotten involved,” she murmured. Raising her eyes to meet his, she shook her head. “He’s my problem, and I have to learn to deal with him.”

He frowned. “Annie, he had no right—”

“That doesn’t matter! Right and wrong isn’t the point.” Annie hiked her chin up a notch and firmed her jaw in a display of moxie that sparked hope in him.

He held his tongue, giving her the chance to speak her mind. Her body language as she gathered herself and recovered from Hardin’s intimidation spoke volumes to him. She was strong. A fighter. She had the mettle to overcome her past. Warmth swirled through his blood as he held her rich-coffee gaze.

Annie swallowed hard and squared her shoulders. “This was my problem, not yours. I have to learn how to handle these situations for myself, if I’m going to—” She tore her eyes away and shook her head again. “Never mind.”

When she pushed up from the floor, Jonah put a hand under her arm to help her to her feet. She shrugged out of his grip. “I’m all right. I don’t need—”

“Okay.” He held his hands up and backed away one step.

Stroking her hands down her uniform apron, she angled a dubious look toward him. “Why have you decided to be my protector? You barely know me.”

He shrugged. “How well do you have to know someone to want to help them?”

She ducked her head and didn’t answer.

Jamming his hands into his pockets, he cocked his head and studied her bruised cheek and swollen lip, evidence of last night’s attack. Even with the injuries marring her ivory skin, her beauty shone through. Annie was a curious blend of child-like fragility and womanly allure. She had a dusting of freckles across her nose that lent to her young, waifish appearance, while her bowed lips and thick-lashed brown eyes contributed to the seductive movie-star quality her hairstyle evoked.

He cracked his knuckles, working off the remnants of adrenaline following his confrontation with Hardin. “Look, are you all right?”

A pointed, dark brown gaze snapped up to his, half hidden by the curtain of hair she kept over her left cheek. “I’m fine. I appreciate your help, but—”

“But nothing. Forget it.” He waved a hand in dismissal and pivoted on his heel. He’d made it as far as the swinging door before he reconsidered. “No, don’t forget it.” He marched back to Annie and drilled her with a hard gaze. “You want to learn to take care of yourself? To handle men like Hardin and that guy in the alley last night?”

Annie blinked her surprise. “What are you talking about?”

“You said you had to learn how to handle situations like this, guys like Hardin.” He flicked a thumb toward the spot where

Hardin had stood earlier. “Did you mean it?”

A deer-in-the-headlights look froze her face.

“I can teach you to handle yourself when a man attacks you. I can show you how to defend yourself, protect yourself.”

She eyed him skeptically for several silent moments. “What about my children?”

“Kids?” Jonah fumbled, caught off guard by her question. “I ... I guess I could teach them, too.”

“No, they’re too young. I mean, can you teach me to protect them from men like ...” She paused, bit her lip, then lowered her voice. “Men like Hardin?”

Jonah held her gaze, moved by the depth of fear, the passion and motherly concern he saw reflected in her dark eyes. A degree of desperation shadowed her expression and tugged at dusty memories deep inside him.

“I can ... if you’re willing to trust me.”

His answer seemed to douse her interest with a cold slap of reality. She frowned and jerked her gaze away with a sigh. Trust was clearly in short supply for Annie. Not surprising.

Jonah twisted his mouth to the side as he thought. “May I have your order pad and pen?”

With a puzzled look, she took the items from the front pocket of her apron and extended them to him.

“What time do you get off work tonight?” He scribbled an address on the pad and clicked the pen closed.

Again she hesitated before answering, her gaze narrowed on

him as if she could detect his motives, any ill-intent or hidden agenda if she studied him close enough. “Eight. Why?”

“That’s my gym.” He tapped the front of the pad. “I’ll meet you there at eight thirty and give you a few pointers on self-defense, if you want. There are plenty of things a woman can do to protect herself, even from a man twice her size. I’ll show you a couple of the most effective ones tonight.”

He handed her back the pen and pad, and she perused the note he’d made. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth again and wound a strand of hair around her finger. “I don’t know. I ... I’d have to call my babysitter and make sure she could stay late. And I hate to miss the kids’ bedtime. I see so little of them as it is.” Her shoulders slumped a bit, and he heard working-mother guilt rife in her tone.

Seizing the opportunity to learn more about her and make her feel more at ease with him, Jonah grinned. “How old are they?”

Her head snapped up. “What?”

“Your kids. How old are they?”

Her expression softened, and warmth flooded her eyes. “Haley is five and a half, and my baby, Ben, is almost two.”

Her obvious affection for her children needled a vulnerable place in Jonah, an emptiness he hadn’t allowed himself to dwell on. The idea of having his own family stirred a complicated mix of emotions in him. He longed for the domestic ideal of home and hearth, but his memories of family left him in a cold sweat. Norman Rockwell dreams of a picket fence and two-point-five

kids were a fantasy for him. Out of reach. Too risky.

His broken family, his only experience with home life, was a recipe for disaster.

Clearing his throat and shoving aside his own bitter memories, he flashed her another smile. "A boy and a girl. That's great. You have a matched set."

A corner of her mouth quirked up. "Hardly matched. They're as opposite as can be."

Jonah chuckled. "Funny how that happens, huh?"

Her mouth curved a bit more, forming the first hint of a grin he'd seen on her lips in weeks. "Yeah. Funny."

"I'd love to meet them someday."

Her smile vanished in a heartbeat, replaced by the damnable wariness again. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I like you. And I like kids. Stands to reason I'd like your kids."

Her brow lowered. "Mr. Devereaux, I'm not interested in—"

"No, you're right." He raised a hand to cut her off. "Too fast. I didn't mean to be pushy." He nodded toward the order pad still in her hand. "But please consider coming tonight. For your safety's sake." As he backed toward the door, he threw in a parting shot he knew was pure manipulation. But he didn't care. "Do it for your kids if not yourself."

Annie needed to learn to protect herself, to stand up to bullies like Hardin, to revive the spark her abuser had extinguished. Jonah wasn't above a little manipulation if it motivated her to

make changes in her life.

The truth was, Annie had been the delivery person when a two-hundred-thousand-dollar transfer of funds was stolen. Had the thief intended to kill her to keep her quiet, stop her from identifying him? Would the party who'd expected the cash seek retribution? Could Hardin become more desperate and, therefore, more dangerous?

No matter how he looked at this turn of events, Jonah didn't like the crosshairs Annie had found herself in after last night. She needed more than just a few self-defense techniques if someone tried to keep her from talking. But his lessons would be a start.

Meanwhile, he'd be extra vigilant. Annie needed someone with his experience and training to watch her back.

Annie surveyed the last few diners who'd come in for a late meal, then faced Lydia, who was working the last shift. "Can you handle things if I go now?"

"Sure thing, honey. I got it covered." The older waitress smiled and jerked her head toward the door. "Get on home to those babies and give 'em a kiss for me, too."

"Thanks, Lydia." Annie untied her apron and stashed it under the counter. Grabbing her purse, she headed back to the kitchen, walking with careful penguinlike steps to avoid slipping on the greasy film that had accumulated on the floor through the day. As she neared Mr. Hardin's office, she heard his raised voice, and her heart beat a little harder.

"That's not enough time! I said I'd get it to you!" he ranted.

As Annie tiptoed past his half-open door to clock out, she caught her reflection on the stainless-steel side of the industrial freezer. The image rubbed a raw nerve.

How many times had she cowered around Walt, tiptoeing through their house in order not to wake him, or quietly keeping a discreet distance to avoid triggering one of his tantrums?

She'd thought her days of treading lightly around hostile men were past, yet here she was skulking past Hardin's office like a guilty child. Frustration and self-censure stabbed Annie.

She'd come too far and paid too high of a price to be free of Walt to fall back into old habits now. Habits born from fear.

Damn it, she didn't want to live in fear anymore! Annie jammed her time card in the clock so hard it crumpled in the middle. Spinning on her heel to leave, she marched back by Hardin's office, her chin up and her back straight.

"Annie!"

She froze, dread slowing her pulse and snagging her breath.

Please, Lord, not another errand like last night.

Heart thumping, she turned toward Hardin's office and stepped to the door. "Yes?"

"Where do you think you're goin'?" he asked around a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. His eyes mirrored the same dark resentment she heard in his tone.

"My shift is over. I was going home."

"Not if I say you don't."

A rock lodged in Annie's stomach. She dragged in a smoke-

laced lungful of air, trying to steel her nerves and battle down the building panic.

And anger—the most dangerous of emotions.

Dealing with the repercussions of Walt's rage had been enough to teach her just how dangerous. But her own temper had led her to say foolish things at times that had only inflamed Walt's wrath. Fury over Walt's unfairness and controlling nature had seethed in her gut like a corrosive waste until she would throw up, so she'd long ago learned to suppress her temper, swallow the bile and deny the heat of anger that flashed through her blood.

Yet despite her best efforts to erase her ill-will and moments of irritation, she still carried a boatload of frustration and ire for the desperate circumstances of her life. She blamed Walt's abuse and her submission to his violence for the dark cloud his threats still cast over her. Now Hardin was doing his best to intimidate and control her, and she struggled to keep the poisonous emotion at bay.

"My shift is over, Mr. Hardin. I need to get home to my children." Her voice quivered with anxiety and barely suppressed indignation. She curled her fingers into her palms, and the pulse of rising adrenaline throbbed in her temples.

Her boss narrowed his eyes and stabbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray on his desk. "Seems to me there's a matter of two hundred thousand dollars you either have to pay back or work off."

The flutter of fear taunted her, beating hard against her

breastbone.

“Mr. H-Hardin, I could never work enough hours to repay—”

“Well, if you ain’t going to work the extra hours, then maybe you could settle your debt with me ... another way.” Surging to his feet, he raked a lascivious gaze over her and smirked.

Annie fell back a step. Disgust slithered over her, and she shivered. Taking a slow breath, she searched for enough confidence to reply without her voice quaking. “No.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, and his gaze continued to roam over her.

“I’ll find a way to repay the money,” she said, though the words were sour knots in her throat that she had to force out. “It will take me a while—” *Like forever*. She cringed at the thought of tightening her budget even further and scraping together small payments for Hardin. “But I’ll find a way.”

A muscle twitched in Hardin’s jaw, and his flinty eyes drilled into her. “I want the money by next week.”

The ice in his tone, his stare sent a deep chill slicing through her. Trembling to her marrow, Annie whirled away and hurried toward the dining room. Her feet slipped and skidded on the greasy kitchen tile, but she didn’t slow down. She had to get away from Hardin. Get out of the diner. Get home to her children—the only place she felt even remotely safe anymore.

“I can show you how to defend yourself, protect yourself.”

As she rushed out of the diner, Jonah’s promise filtered through her head. Her steps slowed, and she reached into her

pocket for the scrap of paper he'd given her with his gym's address.

If only—

Forget *if only*. Dreams and wishes were for other people. She had to deal in reality. In truths and concrete facts.

Her truth was she had to pay her hostile boss a hell of a lot of money.

Picking up her pace again, she jogged to the bus stop, still quaking from Hardin's chilling threat. No way could she find two hundred thousand dollars to repay him, even if she had a year to pay him. Much less a week.

Her bus rumbled up to the stop just as she reached the street corner. While she waited for an older man with a walker to board, she fished in her pocket for her bus pass.

Once more her fingers brushed the crumpled paper Jonah had given her.

"Do it for your kids if not yourself."

Guilt and fear squeezed her chest, tangling with irritation over Jonah's obvious manipulation of her love for her kids. She stared down at the address. What could it hurt just to go and see what Jonah wanted to teach her? He'd already proven he wanted to help, not harm her. And a gym was a public place. She'd be safe there. Right?

"You coming or not?" the bus driver called, jarring her from her deliberations.

"I—" Annie exhaled a deep breath of resignation. She had to

at least *try* to protect herself from Hardin and men like the thief who jumped her last night. She was tired of living with this fear. She'd come too far to lose everything because she let a bully like Hardin intimidate her.

Annie raised her chin and met the bus driver's gaze. "Not."

With a puff of exhaust, the bus chugged away from the curb, and Annie headed toward Jonah's gym.

Chapter 4

The scents of body odor and rubber floor mats greeted Annie as she entered Jonah's gym minutes later. Wrinkling her nose as the unpleasant smells assailed her, she cast a wary glance around the cavernous warehouse.

When Jonah had invited her to his gym, she'd pictured an upscale facility where beautiful bodies jogged on treadmills, followed a perky blond instructor in aerobic dance or toned their muscles on expensive weight machines. This gym was a far cry from her vision.

Dingy and dark with nary a perky blonde in sight, the large room housed four boxing rings and numerous punching bags suspended from the bare rafters by steel chains. A litany of grunts and curses reverberated from the concrete block walls, while burly men in scruffy shorts and sleeveless shirts pounded the weighted bags—or each other.

Apprehension slithered through Annie as she crept deeper into the room. Like a brewing storm, the raw power and the brute violence on display filled the room with an ominous and suffocating energy. Struggling to pull air into her lungs, Annie scanned the men's faces for Jonah.

With every passing minute, she grew more uncomfortable and self-conscious. One by one, sweat-drenched men paused from their training to eye her with curious, even lewd, glances. Her

discomfort spiked as a man in the nearest boxing ring caught a bone-jarring blow to the chin that sent him to the mat with a groan.

"That'll teach you to talk back to me!"

She pressed her throbbing cheek to the cool floor, not daring to get up before Walt stalked from the room. Getting up only gave him the opportunity to knock her down again.

The images before her blurred as tears pricked her eyes.

She staggered backward, edging toward the door. She shouldn't have come. Shouldn't have risked—

As she passed a different boxing ring where two men sparred while a third coached from the ropes, recognition slammed through her. She squinted at the face barely visible behind the protective headgear, and her heart tapped double time.

Jonah.

Stunned, she stared while Jonah exchanged jabs with the other man, shuffling his feet to dodge blows. Sweat glistened on his arms and glued his tank-style T-shirt to the flat plane of his abdomen. Well-defined muscles in his shoulders and chest spoke for the hours of training and conditioning Jonah had put in.

Annie gawked at his brawny build, and heat prickled her skin. An unfamiliar flutter stirred in her chest, and realization that his size and strength had piqued her feminine interest startled her. Had she learned nothing in her marriage to Walt? She'd been physically attracted to Walt when they married. He'd been especially handsome in his military dress uniform the day they

wed. But all the sexual chemistry in the world didn't outweigh the suffering he'd put her through in later years.

Yet she couldn't help but stare at Jonah's toned and powerful physique, his smooth style as he moved around the ring. With practiced skill, he ducked a swing and landed a solid hook to his opponent's pad-protected jaw.

Shocked out of her gawk-fest by his potent punch, Annie gasped.

Jonah's gaze darted to her.

In that split second of his distraction, his opponent struck back with a blow to Jonah's ribs.

Annie felt the blow as surely as if she'd taken the hit herself. The air whooshed from her lungs, and tension screwed her muscles tight. Clapping a hand over her mouth, she fell back another step.

"Devereaux, what the hell are you doing?" the silver-haired man by the ropes shouted. "You gotta keep your eyes in the ring!"

Grinning through a grimace, Jonah raised his boxing gloves. "Time. I've got company."

She sidled toward Jonah as he climbed through the ropes and jumped down to meet her.

"You came." Equal measures of pleasure and surprise colored his tone.

She nodded tightly and gave the activity in the room a meaningful glance. "If I'd known what kind of gym you meant, I don't know that I would have."

His dark eyebrows drew together. "Why?"

Eyeing the muscle-bound giant battering a small punching bag beside her, she inched closer to Jonah. "I'm ... rather out of place, wouldn't you say?"

A warm grin lifted a corner of his mouth. "Hey, I know these guys look pretty rough, but I assure you, you're perfectly safe here."

He rubbed his ribs and winced.

"Are you all right?" She knew more than she cared to about the sting of fist-imposed injuries.

He glanced down at his chest. "It's nothing. Just a reminder that when you're in the ring, you gotta stay focused on your opponent, not be distracted by what's happening outside the ring."

The older man who'd been coaching winked at her. "Even if the distraction is mighty pretty."

Jonah tossed a towel at the other man. "Down, boy."

Annie frowned. "I'm sorry if I—"

"No, no." He waved off her apology. "My fault. I'm just glad you came." To the silver-haired coach, he said, "Frank, I think I'm done for the day. Same time tomorrow?"

Frank nodded. "Sure." To the kid in the ring he called, "Okay, Billy. Hit the showers."

Jonah bit the lace on one glove and pulled it with his teeth, then moved on to the second.

Annie fidgeted with her purse strap. "I can't stay long. My

kids—”

“Pull?” He lifted his hands toward her.

Annie blinked her surprise.

“Please,” he added with a lopsided grin.

Unaccustomed to refusing any man’s request, she awkwardly grasped one bulky glove and tugged. It didn’t budge.

“Harder. You gotta really muscle ‘em off.”

Annie hesitated, jitters dancing in her gut. She slid her purse from her shoulder and set it on the concrete floor. Grabbing Jonah’s boxing glove with both hands, she pulled. Hard. As he freed each hand, Jonah shook his arms and flexed his fingers.

“Thanks.” He took the gloves from her and tossed them next to a duffel bag on the floor at the edge of the ring. Hitching his head toward the locker room, he said, “Give me five minutes to grab a shower, and we’ll get started.”

Annie sent another uncomfortable glance around the gym and bit her lip. “I should probably just get home. Maybe this was a mistake.”

Furrowing his brow, he took her hand in his. His touch sent another flash of tingling heat over her skin.

He ducked his head to meet her gaze and squeezed her fingers gently. “Don’t go. Just five minutes. I need to talk to you, but right now I smell like a goat.”

His farm-animal comparison earned a half grin from her. And her concession. She nodded. “Five minutes.”

With another handsome smile, he snatched up the gym bag

and headed toward the locker room.

“Jonah?”

He turned.

“Do you have a cell phone I can borrow? I need to call my babysitter and tell her I’ll be late.”

“Sure.” He fished in his duffel and extracted a small flip phone. “Catch.” He tossed the phone toward her, and, caught off guard, she barely snagged the cell before it hit the concrete.

While she waited for Jonah, Annie found a corner where she was out of the way and called her apartment. She filled Rani in on her delay, then talked to Haley, who bubbled with excitement over a new lost tooth.

“I saved it to show you, Mommy. And Rani says if I put it under my pillow, the tooth fairy will give me money!”

Annie smiled, loving the joy in her daughter’s voice and trying to recall if she had any change in her wallet to hide under Haley’s pillow.

“Hey, Mommy, maybe you could put *your* teeth under your pillow and get some money from the tooth fairy, too!”

Annie sputtered a laugh. “My teeth?”

“Yeah, then maybe you wouldn’t have to go to work at the diner all the time and could stay home and play with me and Ben.”

Remorse stabbed Annie, cutting her to the quick. “I don’t know, sugar. I think the tooth fairy only wants kids’ teeth.”

“Oh.”

The disappointment in her daughter's tone wrenched Annie's heart. "I'm supposed to have this Saturday off, though, and I promise we'll do something fun. Just you, me and Ben. Maybe go to the park? Okay?"

"Okay."

But Haley sounded skeptical. Too skeptical for a five-year-old. Knowing how many times she'd had to cancel plans with Haley when she had to work extra hours at the diner flooded Annie with fresh guilt.

Jonah emerged from the locker room, wearing a clean T-shirt and jeans, his wet hair combed back from his face. His gaze swept the room looking for her, and when he spotted her, a smile softened the hard planes of his face.

Annie's pulse missed a beat.

Jonah wasn't handsome in the classical sense. So why was he suddenly stirring this schoolgirl reaction in her?

She chastized herself. She was too busy making ends meet, fighting for her survival and reeling from her last devastating relationship to be in the market for a man. She had no business looking at Jonah as anything other than a regular customer at the diner. A mysterious man who'd rescued her from her attacker. The person who'd offered to show her techniques to protect herself and her family from further abuse.

"Haley, sugar, I have to go now. Be sweet for Rani and eat all of your dinner. Okay?" Annie watched Jonah cross the gym floor, his loose-limbed stride confident and relaxed. Her breath

hung in her lungs.

Haley grumbled an unintelligible response as Jonah reached her.

“I’ll be home soon, sugar. B’bye.” She closed the phone and held it out to Jonah. “Thanks.”

Taking the cell from her, he jerked his chin toward a nearby door. “Let’s use the manager’s office. It’s quieter. More private.”

More isolated. Her stomach flip-flopped as she fell in step behind Jonah.

“Hey, Frank,” he called to the coach who was working with a boxer on a small punching bag. “Mind if we use your office for a while?”

The man eyed Annie, then sent Jonah a conspiratorial grin. “Be my guest.”

After leading her into the windowless office with a sign that read “Owner,” Jonah closed the door behind him, muting the cacophony from the gym floor and spiking Annie’s level of discomfort.

She was suddenly hyperaware that she was alone with a man she barely knew. The idea of being alone with Jonah both tantalized and frightened her. Drawing her purse against her chest, she glanced about the dim office. The decor was surprisingly upscale, with oil paintings and a leather couch. The large desk was covered with old photographs of a younger Frank posing with a pretty woman and a blond little girl.

“Why do I make you so nervous?” Jonah’s question drew her

gaze back to him. He angled his head and studied her with a lazy sweep of his eyes.

She forced a smile. "You don't."

Sitting on the edge of the wooden desk, Jonah waved a finger toward her purse. "Your body language says otherwise."

Annie glanced down at her white-knuckle grip on her purse and the defensive position of her arms crossed over her chest. Knowing he could read her so easily didn't help ease her tension.

She sighed. "I'm just ... out of my element here. I don't know you well, and this whole business with Hardin and the money I lost has—"

"Stop." He said the word softly, but with enough cool command to freeze the words on her tongue.

Her gaze snapped up to his.

Jonah folded his arms over his chest and drilled her with his dark green eyes. "Let's get one thing straight. You didn't lose that money. You don't owe Hardin a thing. You were mugged, and the money was stolen. Period."

Annie opened her mouth to reply, but no sound came.

"As for your other points ... " Jonah shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe you don't know me real well, but if you'd let me take you to a quiet dinner somewhere, we could talk and remedy that."

Her heart pounding in her ears, Annie gaped at him. "Like ... a date?"

He nodded. "And if I'm right about you, you're not as out of place at this gym as you'd have me believe."

Already reeling from his invitation to dinner, Annie needed a moment before his last comment registered. “What do you mean I’m not out of place? Do I look like someone who enjoys punching a bag for thrills?”

His face sobered, and he pitched his voice low. “No. But I think you’ve been used as a punching bag by some bastard you once trusted.”

Annie’s head swam, and an odd buzzing rang in her ears. She staggered drunkenly to the nearest chair and dropped onto the seat.

Slowly, he moved toward her and crouched beside her. “Maybe a father. Maybe a husband or boyfriend. Am I right?”

Practiced denials sprang to her tongue but shattered under the weight of his piercing gaze. She struggled to draw a breath. “How ... Why would you think—”

“Because I’ve been there.”

Annie’s breath backed up in her lungs. She shook her head, not sure she’d heard him right. Did he mean he’d been an abuser—or been abused?

Jonah nodded, his expression open and guileless. “I’ve seen what you’ve seen. I know the emotions you’ve known. I recognize the signs.”

He reached for her left cheek and gently grazed her scar with his knuckle.

Mortified, she jerked away and scoffed. “That’s from a car accident. I shattered my cheekbone and couldn’t afford a fancy

plastic surgeon after the emergency surgery.”

The lie tumbled easily from her lips, while a hurricane of confused emotions twisted inside her. Guilt, relief, embarrassment, anger, frustration ... How did she begin to sort it all out?

“Part of that is probably true.”

Clenching her teeth, she shot him a tight scowl. “Are you calling me a liar?”

He wrapped his hand around hers, and she flinched. Undaunted, he squeezed her hand. “I got good at lying about my injuries, too. To teachers, neighbors ... even myself. It wasn’t easy to tell anyone my dad had a nasty temper, and he’d beat us and our mom with little provocation.”

Icy fingers clamped around her heart. Torn between empathy and wariness, she stared into his jade eyes, searching for some hint of insincerity. But his unflinching gaze shone with compassion and honesty.

Unsure what to do with his revelation, Annie gripped the edge of the chair and listened to the thundering of her pulse in her ears. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I wanted you to know I understood what you’d been through, and I know how—”

Annie stiffened, fury coursing through her blood. She shoved to her feet, balling her hands and glaring at Jonah. “Stop it! You can’t begin to know what I’ve been through! And I don’t know what your life was like growing up with a father who hurt you.

Don't you dare try to tell me—”

“All right.” He put a hand on each of her shoulders, and she tensed, realizing the mistake she'd made.

Her stomach knotted. Her mouth dried. Dear God, if she'd ever lost her temper and challenged Walt that way, she'd have paid dearly.

Inhaling sharply, she held her breath, bracing for Jonah's answering wrath.

Instead, he murmured softly, “I'm sorry. You're right. I only meant—”

When a tremble raced through her, he paused, his brow lowering in a concerned frown. Cupping her chin, he lifted her face toward his, his thumb stroking her jaw.

His tender gesture, so opposite the raw power she'd seen him display moments ago, caught her off guard. The warmth of his fingers, the crisp scent of soap that clung to him, the lulling calm in his voice had her senses reeling. Her head swam, and the heat of a blush prickled her skin.

“Relax, beautiful. You're safe with me. I swear it. I will *never* hurt you.” A husky growl of conviction emphasized his vow, a stark contrast to the tenderness of his touch.

Annie couldn't speak, couldn't move. Confused emotions tangled inside her. Part of her wanted to trust Jonah and believe the warm promise in his eyes. Another part of her remembered too clearly the brute violence he'd employed defending her in the alley last night and the power behind his punches in the

boxing ring only moments ago. Despite his kindness and gentle touches, she'd witnessed Jonah's fierce strength and skill. Her body's reaction to him was only the natural response to being near so much virile magnetism. Wasn't it?

When she didn't respond, Jonah lowered his hand and stepped back. He sighed and glanced away, his expression pensive. "Annie, I asked you here because I have a bad feeling about what happened last night."

Sinking back onto the chair, she rubbed her throbbing temple and shoved aside distracting thoughts of Jonah's allure. "That makes two of us. Hardin isn't likely to forget the money I lost any time soon. He's going to make my life miserable until I repay him."

Jonah popped his knuckles restlessly and frowned. "I wasn't referring to Hardin."

She glanced up. "What do you mean?"

"I don't think your attack was random. I think the guy who stole the money was waiting for you, that he was expecting someone to be making that delivery for Hardin."

A chill shimmied through her. "Waiting for me?"

"I can't go into detail, but ... I have reason to believe the money you were delivering was profits from a gambling ring that Hardin had laundered through the diner's accounts."

Her stomach seesawed. Annie's emotions had spun in every conceivable direction in the past few minutes, but Jonah's claim made her head reel. Hands shaking, she hugged herself and drew

a ragged breath.

“The man who mugged you may have intended to kill you so that you couldn’t make an ID. Or Hardin may have picked you to make the delivery because he thought you’d be least likely to talk, that he could keep you quiet through intimidation. Or ... there are other scenarios possible, but they all boil down to this—you’re involved now. You’re in danger.”

Chapter 5

This couldn't be happening. Not now. Not again!

Nausea flooded Annie's gut, and a bitter taste rose in her throat. She shook her head. "No. I can't ... I didn't d-do anything. I don't know anything. I—I—"

Jonah dragged a hand over his mouth. "Like it or not, because of that delivery you made, because of the theft, you are involved now, and you're going to have to be careful. Watch your back. Take precautions."

Annie muffled a half gasp, half sob.

She'd just spent months escaping a possessive and vengeful husband, seen him brought up on charges of stalking and murder, feared for her life and her children's. She'd only recently started piecing her life back together, finding some sanity and calm.

As he wrapped a firm, warm hand around her wrist, Jonah's gaze drilled into her. "You need to be able to protect yourself. I want to show you a few basic techniques to deter an attacker."

She shook off his hand and narrowed her eyes, suspicion tickling her neck. "How do you know all this? What proof do you have that Hardin's doing anything illegal?"

"I don't have anything solid enough to take to the authorities yet, but—"

"You didn't want me to call the cops last night. Why?" Her mind clicked, reviewing from a new perspective her attack,

Jonah's rescue and his defense of her with Hardin that morning. "Are you involved in whatever's going on at the diner?" She rose and stumbled away from Jonah. "How do I know there really is a gambling ring or money laundering or ... or—"

Her chest seized, and her stomach pitched at the idea of unwittingly becoming ensnared in unlawful dealings at the diner. The turkey sandwich she'd eaten at lunch roiled in her belly and threatened to come back up.

Jonah sighed. "I know because ... I've spent the past six months on this investigation."

"This *investigation*? You're a cop?"

"I was. In Little Rock. But I left the force about a year ago, right before I moved here."

Mentally she reviewed everything she'd heard the other waitresses say about Jonah. "You told Susan you worked at the paper mill. That was a lie, wasn't it?"

He blew a deep breath out through pursed lips. "Yeah. That's my cover."

Annie's heart tapped a staccato rhythm, and she studied Jonah with new eyes, doubt and distrust nipping at her. "Your cover? Who are you? *What* are you? Why should I trust you? What do you want from me?" The questions tumbled from her in increasing volume as her fear mounted.

He quieted her by touching a finger to her lips. "I don't work for anyone. This investigation is personal for me. I've been looking into the gambling ring and money laundering because of

a friend of mine. The men involved in the ring swindled Michael out of his entire retirement savings.”

A sympathetic pang gripped her chest. Annie understood the gravity of such a loss. She lived paycheck to paycheck and couldn’t imagine how she’d survive if her income disappeared.

Jonah stepped back and propped himself against the scarred desk again. “Last night, I asked you not to go to the cops because I was afraid police involvement in your mugging would scare some of the players into hiding. I’m getting close to nailing these bastards, and I didn’t want any unnecessary outside law enforcement to rock the boat before I get the evidence I need.”

Annie shook her head trying to wrap her mind around the scenario Jonah laid out. “Wh-what kind of evidence?”

“I need to see for myself exactly how the operation runs, who is involved up the chain. I’ll need to videotape a transaction or record incriminating conversations. If I can get them, bank records, computer files, a log of wagers, any kind of paper trail to support my case.” He wiped his palms on his jeans and shook his head. “But the deeper I get into their organization, the dicier it gets. These men have a lot of money at stake. If they get spooked, they’ll protect themselves and their interests in the operation by any means possible. Even murder.”

A numbing chill crept through Annie. She stared at Jonah, questions spinning through her brain, yet she couldn’t make her tongue work. The weight of the situation settled on her lungs, squeezing the breath from her. By trying to save her job, had she

embroiled herself in a scheme that could cost her her life?

The air in the tiny dark office vibrated with tension. Jonah held her gaze, his green eyes difficult to read in the dim light.

Swallowing the pressure in her throat, Annie voiced her doubts. "How do I know you're telling me the truth? Why should I trust you?"

"Your attack last night was real enough, wasn't it? Hardin's fury over the stolen money was no act. I've no doubt he's up a major creek right now with whoever that money was going to."

Joseph Nance. The name Hardin had given her flashed through her mind, but she kept silent, playing her cards close to her chest until she could figure out for herself who she should trust and where Jonah really fit in the dangerous scenario he described.

"I know I've dropped a bomb on you. I understand how scary this must be. But I need you to believe that I am the only person at that diner looking out for your interests. I want to protect you from any fallout, but you'll have to trust me."

Her trust had been shattered by the last man she gave it to and would be hard-earned for Jonah. Another biting chill nipped her skin. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing right now. But stay alert. Keep your eyes and ears open. And learn how to defend yourself." He pushed away from the desk and moved close enough for her to feel the body heat radiating from his skin. "That's where I come in."

Jonah reached for Annie, noting the wariness that shadowed her eyes. When he touched her arm, she stiffened and pulled

away.

“What are you doing?” Alarm flashed in her mahogany eyes.

“Getting to the business at hand. Teaching you some defensive moves to protect yourself.”

Her stance relaxed a fraction, but her expression remained cautious. He understood that caution better now. Her story about a car accident causing her facial scar aside, she hadn't denied his conjecture about her history of abuse. Her body language had told him all she didn't say. He had to proceed carefully. The last thing he wanted was to cause Annie any more pain.

But her protection was paramount, and he couldn't be with her twenty-four seven.

“Let's start with the basics.” He squared his feet in front of her. “Your best strike points are your attacker's eyes, his groin and his throat. Concentrate your efforts there. Okay? Like this ...”

Jonah lifted his arms to demonstrate the best hand position for a throat strike.

Annie rubbed a hand down her arm, her expression dubious. “I don't know. Fighting back will only make him mad, make him hurt me more.”

Jonah lowered his hands and stepped back. He remembered how Annie had shut down last night, retreating into herself and giving her attacker no resistance. “Do you believe your life is worth fighting for?”

Her chin lifted, surprise flickering across her face. “Of course.”

“Do you? Deep down, do you truly believe your life is worth defending at any cost? Because to save your life, you may have to do things that are difficult, or embarrassing, or impolite or disgusting. You have to believe you’re worth it and be willing to do whatever it takes. Gouging eyeballs, biting until you draw blood ...”

She winced and pulled her arms closer to her body.

Jonah scratched his jaw, reassessing his approach with Annie. His first task was helping her overcome her skittishness. Maybe showing her a few simple, less invasive moves would help build her confidence.

“Lower your arms to your sides,” he said, doing so himself. When she complied, he gave her an encouraging smile. “Now I promise not to hurt you. I just want to show you a couple tricks you can use.”

Her brow puckered skeptically.

“What would you do if someone grabbed your arm like this?” He wrapped his hand around her wrist with a secure grip.

She gasped and tried to jerk her arm back. He held tight.

“Instinct tells you to pull back, but unless you’re stronger than your attacker, that won’t work, will it?”

She raised a startled look from her wrist, meeting his gaze. “So ... what do I do?”

Beneath his fingers, the flutter of her pulse beat harder, faster. He became acutely aware of the delicate softness of her skin, the poignant blend of hope and vulnerability in her expression and

the answering thump of his own heart.

For weeks now, he'd been intrigued by Annie, attracted to her, and the protective instincts she brought out in him only deepened the connection he felt. Knowing how satiny smooth her skin felt stoked the fire that smoldered in his blood when he was around her and teased his imagination. *Steady, boy.*

"Step closer to me." When she hesitated, he added, "Come on. Keep your elbow down and close to your body."

Drawing a shaky breath, Annie edged nearer.

"Okay, look what that did to my grip, the angle of my wrist."

Her wary gaze still on him, she tipped her head like a curious puppy, then glanced down at the awkward cant of his hand.

"Now make a fist and twist it up toward my thumb and over my arm."

She followed his directions and broke free of his grasp. Instead of smiling at her success, Annie scowled. "I didn't do that. You let go on purpose."

He chuckled. "Yeah, because I didn't want a broken wrist. Here. Try it on me, and I'll show you."

Annie gripped the arm he extended at his wrist, and he worked through the steps he'd just shown her slowly, repeating, "Step in. Arm close to you. Fist. Twist toward their thumb and—"

"Ow!" Annie dropped his arm and shook her hand as he broke her hold. She blinked at him, her expression stunned.

He sent her a satisfied grin. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I—" She wet her lips and stood taller. A bit of the

skepticism melted from her expression, replaced by intrigue. “It works.”

“Of course it works.” He chuckled. “I’m not gonna teach you stuff that doesn’t work. What’s the point in that?”

“Touché.” The corner of her mouth twitched, and a pink flush stained her cheeks.

Even that sultry hint of a grin scrambled his concentration and filled his chest with a warmth that expanded until he couldn’t catch his breath. But her delicate blush reminded him that despite her full lips and temptress hairstyle, Annie was off-limits. He had nothing to offer the young mother except heartache, and she’d seen enough pain in her life.

“Okay, next move.” He stepped behind her, catching her shoulders when she tried to turn toward him. “No, this time let’s suppose someone comes up from behind and grabs you like this ...” He circled her with his arms, pinning her arms to her sides, and tugged her back against his chest. Again, she stiffened under his restrictive hold.

The light floral scent of her shampoo teased his senses. He gritted his teeth, steeling himself when her futile attempts to break from his hold caused her fanny to buck against his crotch.

After a moment of panicked wiggling, her breath coming in shallow gasps, she stilled. “Let go. Please. I—I don’t want to do this.”

“Struggling doesn’t do anything but wear you out, Annie. You have to use your head. Stay calm.”

She gave a small nod and drew a tremulous breath.

“You can break his grip by dropping to the ground. Just lift your feet. But shift all your weight onto his arms. Or if you throw your head back hard—although not now, ‘cause I don’t want a bloody nose—your skull is hard enough to bash your attacker’s face.”

She tipped her head back slowly until she lightly bumped his face. Her silky hair tickled his nose and stroked his cheek.

Another spike of arousal sucker punched him, and he wrestled down the urge to nuzzle her neck. He cleared his throat and stepped back, allowing her to face him. “That move, uh ... will at least catch him off guard.”

Mentally he regrouped, concentrating on the details Annie needed to know. He had only to think of the dangerous people who could be gunning for her after last night and the importance of her knowing how to protect herself to bring him back to the task at hand. “That’s a key thing to remember. If you can pull a surprise move on him, it gives you back the upper hand for a few seconds. Use those seconds to strike a debilitating blow that will help you get away. Got it?”

“What debilitating blows? I’m not Bruce Lee.”

“Remember those strike points I mentioned?”

She hesitated. “Eyes, throat and ... groin.”

“Good. We’ll get to the Bruce Lee part later. But first you have to break his hold. Once you’re free, pull out your pepper spray and prepare to douse him.”

Her forehead dented as she frowned. “I don’t have pepper spray.”

“Get some. Keep it with you.” He waved her close again. “Let me show you something else.”

When he stepped toward her, Annie visibly shivered, and Jonah’s heart squeezed. He hated the fear that flickered in her watchful eyes. Some bastard had really done a number on her. The mugging last night hadn’t helped.

He pressed his mouth in a taut line, realizing that, more than the physical scars on her cheek, Annie bore emotional scars on her heart thanks to the rough treatment she’d received from a man she’d loved. Just as his mom had.

But understanding the source of her ghosts made it all the more important to him that he not add to her pain. He had to be careful not to give her false expectations, not to follow through on the desire that pounded in his veins. He had to protect her from himself.

He paused and held his palms up. “You up for one more demonstration?”

She hugged herself and, closing her eyes, inhaled a deep breath. Blew it out slowly. “All right.”

Pride washed through him. Given her history, he knew any reminders of violence and her vulnerability had to be frightening, yet she was here, giving his lessons a fair shake. She had the core strength and resilience that were essential to rebounding from the knocks life had given her.

From behind her, he held her waist with one hand and pressed his other forearm against her throat. “There are two things you can do if you’re being choked like this. First, turn your head to the side, into the crook of his arm. That repositions your windpipe so that you can get air.”

She moved her head accordingly.

“Good. Perfect.”

As he splayed the hand at her waist wider, snuggling her closer to his body, he heard the whisper of her breath catching. A tiny gasp. A feathery near sigh.

The sound shot fire through his blood. He could all too easily imagine her making sexy sighing sounds during sex. Her wispy breath caressed the arm he held to her throat.

Gritting his teeth, he stifled a moan. Jonah shifted his arm from her throat to complete the circle around her waist. Perhaps his idea of private lessons had been ill-advised. The intimate contact required to teach the defensive moves correctly would test even a monk’s willpower. Especially when working with a woman as attractive and intriguing as Annie.

He took a moment to gather his composure, blocking out the mental images of stroking her pale skin and exploring the soft curves that were currently nestled against him like a custom-fit glove.

“If he’s holding you—” Jonah stopped, hearing the rumbling, husky quality that darkened his tone and left no secret of his arousal. The subtle tensing of her muscles told him she hadn’t

missed the shift in the atmosphere, the crackle of sexual tension. He cleared his throat.

Without warning, Annie went limp in his arms. The sudden weight on his arms, the shift in his center of balance sent him sprawling forward. Just as he'd told her it would.

Using lightning reflexes, employed a half second too late to avoid falling, Jonah twisted, landing beside her rather than crushing her with his weight. His shoulder caught the brunt of the tumble, and he rolled to his back, his breath jarred from his lungs.

Annie scrambled away, climbing to her feet and edging to the far side of the room. With her head bowed to her hands, she stood with her back to him, shaking.

Jonah pinched the bridge of his nose. So much for protecting her from himself and reining in his attraction to her.

Private lessons were too intimate, too personal. Their proximity clearly intimidated her. But how was he supposed to help her learn defensive maneuvers without driving himself insane touching her, having her body close to his?

Perhaps more than self-defense lessons, Annie needed to exorcize personal demons. Fortunately, he knew where she could get help with both.

Chapter 6

Annie struggled for a breath and fought to calm the trembling that racked her muscles. She'd known she'd been wrong to come here tonight the minute she realized the kind of gym Jonah frequented. But her real mistake had been something she'd never expected.

She dragged in a cleansing breath and tried to ignore the weight of Jonah's stare. She knew he was waiting for an explanation of her sudden panic. But how did she explain what she didn't understand herself? Working one-on-one had been intimidating at first, but seeing how effective even simple moves could be had buoyed her confidence.

That self-assurance had shattered when he wrapped her in his restrictive hold. The binding hold of his arms had frightened and enticed her at the same time. How screwed up was that?

One minute his hold reminded her of being grabbed in the alley last night, spiking her anxiety. The next moment Jonah spoke his instructions in her ear and her tension dissolved, replaced by an odd thrum of desire.

Having his arms locked securely around her gave her a sense of safety she hadn't know in years. Feeling his body, a wall of strength and heat, pressed against hers made her head spin and her skin tingle. The scent of soap and man filled her nose and enticed her like forbidden fruit.

Then Jonah described an attack scenario for his demonstration that raised a cold sweat on her temple and stirred a fresh swell of panic in her chest.

She'd been fine, though, until she'd heard the change in his voice. His tone had dipped to a sexy rasp that told her she wasn't alone in her attraction. She'd sensed the jolt of awareness that rippled through him in the tensing of his muscles, the moist rasp of his breath on the back of her neck. And her body had responded with its own shudder of anticipation.

Squeezing her hands into fists, Annie tried to sort out the jumble of emotions churning her stomach and spinning her thoughts. Why did Jonah make her want to disregard all the painful lessons life had taught her about men?

"Annie, what's wrong?" The tender concern in Jonah's voice did little to calm the frenzy of activity inside her. The man confused her. Frightened her. Tempted her when she had no business ever giving another man a second glance.

Dear God, she'd just untangled her life and her children's from a controlling, abusive monster. The last thing she wanted was to become involved with another man. Especially one whose prowess in the boxing ring she'd witnessed herself. He could be lethal if he chose. So why did Jonah's gentle hands and warm eyes turn her insides to goo and scramble her sense of reason?

Turning, she forced a fleeting smile. "Nothing's wrong. I just ... need to get home now. My kids ..."

His steady probing gaze flustered her, and she snatched up

her purse without finishing the excuse. Clearly, he knew she was lying.

“We’ve barely started. There’s more you need to know. Important tactics—”

“No. I can’t stay. I—”

“You need to protect yourself.” He crossed the room, stopping her as she tried to sidle out the door. “Some other time then? I’ll be here again tomorrow. Same time.”

She shook her head, avoiding the unnerving intensity of his dark eyes. “I have to work.”

“Then you pick the day. I’ll be here.”

“I don’t think so. I—I’ll get some pepper spray and ... I’ll be fine.” She edged closer to the door, raising her head only long enough to slant him a quick smile. “Thanks, though.”

He placed his hand on her arm, and her pulse jumped. His touch scorched her skin and weakened her knees.

“Annie, you’re in the middle of a bad situation at the diner. I don’t know what’s going to happen now that Hardin’s money was stolen, but you need to take precautions. I don’t mean to frighten you, but—”

“But you are.” She sighed and forced the starch back into her bones as she lifted her gaze to his. “I am frightened. But not just because of everything you’ve said tonight. I’m scared of a lot of things. I’m afraid I won’t have enough paycheck to feed my kids through the end of the week. I’m scared I’ll tick Hardin off and lose my job. I’m scared that while I’m working sixty-hour weeks

at the diner, I'll miss seeing my kids grow up. Haley lost a tooth today, her first, and I missed it!" Tears thickened her voice, but she plowed on. Once her vent started, she couldn't stop the tide of frustration and pain. "And most of all, I'm terrified that some ignorant parole board will let my ex-husband out of prison, that I'll have to go into hiding again so he can't kill me!"

Jonah straightened his spine and firmed his mouth as if satisfied to have his suspicions confirmed. But the hard edge in his expression softened and compassion warmed his eyes.

In a quieter, more ragged voice, she whispered, "So yeah, I'm frightened, and your talk of money laundering and goons coming after me to shut me up doesn't help. All I want is to raise my children in peace. I never wanted—"

She choked on a sob, and Jonah tugged her into his arms, holding her against his wide chest.

Annie dug her fingers into his T-shirt and rested her forehead under his chin. She hadn't meant to spill so much of her personal life at his feet. But the damage was done now. He knew more than anyone else from the diner. More than anyone other than her women's center counselor, Ginny.

"I've seen what you've seen."

"It wasn't easy to tell anyone my dad was a mean drunk ..."

Could Jonah actually understand something of the horror she'd been through? The possibility caused a hard tug in her chest. The comfort and protection of his embrace tempted her to lose herself for a few precious minutes. To lower her guard and

let him into her heart.

But relying on Jonah for her safety meant falling back into the traps that had imprisoned her in a violent marriage. Depending on any man for anything, whether security or shelter or her identity, would be a step backward. Wouldn't it?

Her kids were counting on her to be strong, to be self-reliant.

She swiped at her runny nose with the back of her hand and shoved out of his arms. "I have to go. I've already stayed too long."

"Annie, if you'd—"

Before he could finish, she jerked open the door and fled.

"Annie, wait!" Jonah's voice boomed through the cavernous gym, chasing her out to the street. Without looking, she knew he was behind her, that he'd follow her home as he had the night before.

Just as she knew the feel of his embrace and warm breath in her ear were sweet sensations she wouldn't soon forget.

Chapter 7

The next morning as Annie left for work, she paused at the edge of the parking lot and turned to wave at Haley, who watched from the apartment window. Her goodbye ritual, which Haley insisted on, took an ominous turn when she glimpsed a man for a split second before he darted behind a tree.

Her heart fluttering erratically, Annie smiled and lifted a wave to her daughter, while keeping an eye on the large live oak tree where the man had disappeared.

Jonah? Probably.

For some reason she couldn't fathom, he'd appointed himself her guardian. As she'd expected, he'd walked her home last night, having caught up to her several blocks from the boxing gym. She'd refused his offer to drive her, not wanting to be alone with him in the narrow confines of his front seat. Yet even outside, an arm's-length away, walking the city streets back toward her apartment, he'd crowded her. His presence on her walk home had compounded the conflicting feelings her self-defense lesson had stirred. If Jonah was correct about the danger she was in, she appreciated his efforts to keep her safe. Yet the idea of needing a man's protection nettled her, especially now when she was supposed to be making an independent stand.

He had at least granted her wish for quiet, not bothering to make meaningless conversation. He'd only warned her to lock up

when she got inside and bid her a good night at the foot of the stairs to her apartment.

So why, if he'd walked *with* her last night, was he being so furtive this morning? Sighing her irritation, Annie spun back around and marched toward the bus stop. She didn't see him get on her bus when it arrived, yet the sense of being watched, being followed, stayed with her all the way to the diner. Annoying, cloying, unsettling.

By the time she reached work, she'd grown edgy and waspish, and she planned to give him a piece of her mind. What was he doing tailing her like some pervert when his warnings of danger already had her jumpy and looking over her shoulder? The nerve of him!

Annie stormed through the diner's front door and slammed her purse under the front counter with a huff.

"Whoa," a familiar male voice said. "I was going to say good morning, but obviously yours hasn't been so far, if your mood is any indication."

She snapped her gaze up to the smiling man sitting at the lunch counter.

Jonah. With a half-eaten plate of eggs and grits in front of him.

Her pulse scampered as her pique morphed to dismay. "You're here."

The corner of his mouth hiked higher. "Aren't I every day?"
"But if you're here, then who—" A chill slid through her.

One dark eyebrow dipped over Jonah's incisive stare. "Who what?"

Annie pressed a hand to her swirling stomach and shook her head. "I ... Nothing."

Had the man behind the tree been her imagination? Had she really been tailed to the diner, or had she conjured the sensation because she'd expected Jonah to escort her?

She twitched her lips, the closest thing to a grin she could manage at the moment. "Forget it. I ..."

She cleared her throat and tried to shake the jitters that danced down her spine.

Jonah's concerned gaze lingered, reminding her that just hours ago she'd been in his arms, held close to his masculine heat and strength. Yesterday, when his hands had been splayed intimately against her ribs, his warm breath fanning her nape, how could she not have entertained sexual images of him? And how did she keep those same images from taunting her this morning?

She fumbled to unfold a clean apron, and though she studiously avoided Jonah's gaze, she felt his eyes tracking her movements behind the counter.

Susan, one of the other waitresses, stood by the order window, her long blond braid trailing down her back as she rolled silverware into napkins. "Mornin', Annie. Am I ever glad you're here! It's been a zoo."

Annie returned a smile, glad for the distraction. "Good morning."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than the morning took a decided turn toward *bad*. Two regulars, the rude and intimidating men Jonah had been sitting with the night she was mugged, sauntered into the restaurant. The men slid into their usual booth, and the larger man snapped his fingers to call her to the table.

As if she were a dog he could summon to grovel at his feet.

Annie's skin crawled, and she gritted her teeth.

Susan stepped over to top off Jonah's coffee. She gave the new arrivals a meaningful glance and rolled her eyes. "Want me to get their order for ya, hon?"

Jonah glanced over his shoulder toward the men in question. His shoulders tensed almost imperceptibly. If Annie hadn't been looking for his reaction, she'd have missed the subtle flinch. Why had Jonah been talking with the two men the other night? Were they involved in the gambling and money-laundering investigation he was conducting?

Hands shaking, she tied on her apron and shoved a fresh order pad in her pocket. She gave Susan a grateful smile and shook her head. "No. Let me go clock in, then I'll take care of them."

"Devereaux!" the shorter man called to Jonah.

Jonah sent Annie what she could only call a sharp, warning glance before he faced the men's table and nodded an acknowledgment.

The second man returned a nod, and Jonah carried his coffee over to sit at the men's booth.

Squelching the uneasy jangle inside her, Annie hurried into the kitchen to clock in.

“You’re late!” Hardin shouted at her from his post beside the grill cook.

Without answering, Annie walked carefully on the slick floor and consulted the time clock as she punched her card. She was, in fact, ten minutes early.

He’s trying to rattle you. As if she needed further rattling that morning.

Someone had followed her to the diner from her apartment. She was sure of it. If not Jonah, then who? And why?

And what was she supposed to make of that odd look Jonah had just sent her? Was he trying to tell her something? Serving the goons was unnerving enough without Jonah sending her unspoken signals.

Taking a deep breath for courage, Annie grabbed a coffeepot and headed to the goons’ table.

Temporarily setting aside his concerns surrounding Annie’s strange mood that morning, Jonah eased into the booth next to Pulliam and across from Farrout. “Morning, gentlemen.”

Farrout arched one thick eyebrow. “You have something for me?”

So much for small talk.

Jonah fished in his back pocket, then slid a folded envelope across the Formica table. Farrout lifted the flap and verified the contents—a cashier’s check for eight thousand dollars. The

bookie sent him a dark look.

Jonah shrugged. "Like I said before, I'll have the rest at the end of the month, after I get paid."

Pulliam scoffed, and Farrout silenced him with a hooded gaze. "With interest."

His anger spiking, Jonah balled his hand, then sucked in a deep breath to cool his knee-jerk reaction. "You never mentioned interest the other night. We agreed that—"

"You want in or don't you?" Farrout interrupted, his tone flat.

Frustration gnawed at Jonah. He had to play by this scumbag's rules if he wanted firsthand knowledge of how the operation worked. He ground his teeth and finally gave a jerky nod. "How much interest?"

Farrout exchanged a look with his partner.

"Twenty-five percent," Pulliam said, angling his body to lean his back against the wall.

Jonah was ready to argue the point when Pulliam's gaze shifted.

The scents of fresh coffee and flowers alerted Jonah to Annie's arrival even before he turned. His libido snapped to attention. While she filled Farrout's and Pulliam's mugs with hot brew, Jonah inhaled deeply, and the floral aroma of her shampoo sparked memories of holding her body close at the gym. With effort, he shoved down his natural reaction to Annie.

For her sake, he couldn't give Farrout or Pulliam any indication there was any outside connection between him and

Annie. He prayed she'd read his unspoken message warning her of the same before he'd joined the shysters at their table.

He hazarded a glance at her, but she kept her eyes on her pad as she took the other men's order. Before she left, her doelike eyes found his. "Anything else for you?"

Her gaze clung, asking more than just what food he wanted. Jonah schooled his face, wanting with every fiber of his being to reach up and stroke the worry lines creasing her brow.

He shook his head and tore his attention away before anything in his expression gave him away.

Once Annie left, Farrout got back to the business at hand. "Here's how it works. Your money goes into the pool with everyone else's. If your team wins, you split the pot with anyone else who had money on the winner. Minus our cut, of course."

Jonah frowned. "Your cut."

Farrout shrugged blithely. "Like your friendly office pool, but with higher stakes."

"And your rules."

"Exactly," Pulliam answered, a smug grin pulling his cheek. "We gotta make something for our services."

Jonah's gut churned. How could Michael have gotten mixed up with something so obviously crooked?

But Michael's perception had been altered. His gambling had become an addiction. Compulsive. An illness. The high stakes would have been as tempting to Jonah's mentor as a cold beer would be to an alcoholic.

“So how big is the pool? How many people have paid in?”

Farrout shook his head. “Proprietary information.”

When Jonah scowled, Pulliam chortled. “What? You can trust us.”

Trust them to fleece him like they’d fleeced Michael, perhaps.

Annie returned with the men’s orders, and as she set Farrout’s plate in front of him, he seized her wrist. “I didn’t want toast. All I ordered was an omelette. Don’t try to charge me for toast I didn’t order, ya hear?”

Jonah bristled, remembering the thug’s rough treatment of Annie a couple of nights earlier. He leaned forward, ready to rip the bastard’s throat out.

But something in Annie’s posture stopped him. Her mouth tightened, and color crept to her cheeks. Squaring her shoulders, she stared at Farrout’s grip on her arm, then stepped closer to him. “The omelette comes with toast. There’s no extra charge.” She circled her wrist, twisting her hand toward his thumb. And freeing herself from his grip. “*Sir.*”

She stepped back, her expression almost as stunned as Farrout’s. Jonah bit the inside of his cheek to contain his proud grin and his chuckle of amusement at Farrout’s expense. He wasn’t in a position to gloat over Annie’s victory while he had business of his own to conduct.

Farrout glared at Annie’s back as she marched back to the kitchen. “She just lost her tip.”

Jonah squelched his gnawing disgust for Farrout and focused

on his goal. If his plan worked, he'd have the sweet satisfaction of ending Farrout's days of manhandling waitresses. Permanently.

He sat through the rest of his meeting with Farrout and Pulliam wishing he could scoop Annie into a bear hug and congratulate her for taking a stand, for her skilled use of the technique she'd only learned last night. He prayed that this demonstration of the technique's effectiveness would convince her to continue with the private lessons.

But did he want to teach Annie one-on-one for her sake—or for his? He couldn't deny his attraction to Annie. He wanted to spend more time with her, get to know her, explore the mysteries that surrounded her. But even without his nine years at the Little Rock Police Department, anyone could have figured out the intimate nature of the private lessons bothered Annie.

After Farrout and Pulliam left the diner, Jonah headed up to the lunch counter to pay for his breakfast. His encounter with the two bookies left him feeling contaminated, tainted by association. His gut told him these two lowlifes were responsible for conning Michael, sending him into the downward spiral that ultimately killed him.

Jonah itched to get into the ring and work off his frustration with the slow pace of his investigation. He needed to sweat off Farrout's invisible filth, which clung to his skin and infected his soul.

If you lie down with dogs ...

Susan hustled over to the cash register to take his money, a

wide grin at the ready. “Off to the mill, handsome?”

“You lied.” Jonah mentally flinched remembering Annie’s reaction to his cover of shift work at the paper mill.

“Fraid so.” He handed her his cash and managed a polite smile.

The blond waitress was attractive enough, and he usually enjoyed exchanging flirtatious banter with her. Today he only wanted to ruminate on where his investigation was going and how to crank it up to the next level without arousing suspicion.

“I think pot roast is on the menu for tonight.” Susan handed him his change. “Tempt you to come back in for dinner?”

“Susan, you know it’s not the food that brings me back every night.” Jonah gave her a wink, then scanned the dining room.

He needed to speak to Annie in private before he left—and not just about her self-defense lessons. Something had spooked her this morning. When she’d arrived at the diner and seen him, the flush tinting her cheeks had waned to a ghostly pallor.

Jonah stalled, taking his time putting away his change and unwrapping a mint from the basket by the register. Finally, Annie bustled through the swinging door from the kitchen, casting a wary glance toward the table where he’d had his meeting with Farrout and Pulliam. Relief flashed over her face when she found the table empty.

Jonah moved behind the counter so he could speak to her without raising his voice. “Annie, do you have a minute?”

Spinning toward him with a startled gasp, Annie frowned.

“You’re not supposed to be back here.”

He hitched his head toward the front door. “So follow me out, and we’ll talk there.”

She gave the dining room a meaningful glance. “I have customers.”

“They’ll wait. I just need a minute.” He took her elbow and nudged her toward the front door.

With a sigh of exasperation, she accompanied him to the sidewalk in front of the diner.

The March sun warmed the air, and a spring breeze lifted her hair, revealing her scars. Annie quickly combed the tousled wisps back over her cheek with her fingers.

Tempted to thread his own fingers through the glossy strands, Jonah shoved his hands into his pockets. “They’re not that noticeable, you know. I don’t see why you cover them.”

Annie shot a startled look toward him.

He angled his head. “Besides, sexy as that side part is, it hides your best feature. You have beautiful eyes, Annie.”

She gaped at him for a moment as if she couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing. “Is this what you brought me out here for? Patronizing flattery?”

He jerked his shoulders back. “Patronizing? I’m not trying to insult you.”

She twisted her mouth into a dismissive frown. “What did you want to talk about? I have to get back to work.”

“Why were you surprised to see me here when you got to

work? What happened this morning on your way in?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and shrugged a shoulder. "Nothing."

But the nervous glint in her eyes betrayed her.

"The truth."

She cocked her chin up, but the protest on her lips died when he narrowed a hard gaze on her. With a resigned sigh, she turned to watch the traffic on the side street. "I thought you were following me. When I left my apartment this morning, I thought I saw ..."

He waited for her to finish, but she only shook her head. "It was probably just my imagination." She slanted an irritated glance at him. "You've got me so paranoid about someone gunning for me because of that stolen money that I'm jumping at my own shadow."

An uneasy tremor rippled through him. Instinct told him that whatever she'd sensed, whatever she'd seen had been no trick of her imagination.

"Just the same, I think I should drive you home tonight, bring you to work when you—"

"No."

He reached for her arm, determined to make her understand the seriousness of the situation. "Annie, until I can be sure you're safe—"

"I said no." She wrenched free of his grip and took a big step back. "I'm not your responsibility, Jonah. I need to take care of

myself.”

“Then meet me tonight for another self-defense lesson.”

Her shoulders drooped, and she shook her head. “I don’t think so. I—”

“Annie, think about it—you’ve only had one lesson, and already you’ve put something you learned to use.”

The corner of her mouth lifted, and she peeked up at him. “I surprised myself with that.”

“Why are you surprised? You’re a strong, capable woman. You can do anything you want if you apply yourself to it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You sound like Ginny.” Tipping her head, she met his eyes briefly. “She’s my counselor at the women’s center.”

The simple statement told Jonah a great deal. The Lagniappe Women’s Center counseled and aided women who’d been raped, abused or otherwise traumatized. This Ginny Annie referred to was likely responsible for helping Annie free herself from her abusive situation. A good ally to have in her corner. That Annie trusted him enough to confide having used the center’s resources was progress.

Jonah grinned. “I like Ginny already.”

Annie shifted her weight and sighed. “Look, I plan to buy a can of pepper spray on the way home tonight. I’ll be fine.”

“And what if someone really is following you? Pepper spray is a start, but to defend yourself from—”

“No!” She shuddered and raised both palms toward him.

“Jonah, I appreciate your time yesterday and your concern for me, but ... I just ... I can’t ...”

When she hesitated, he asked, “Is it me? Is it working with me in private that bothers you?”

Her expression answered him even though she didn’t. The awkward, apologetic look she gave him burrowed to his core. He’d suspected as much, should have known better.

“There’s an alternative. The local police department offers ongoing self-defense classes for women at the training center on Wood Street. They meet four days a week at 5:00 p.m. The instructor is a woman. A police officer. The class is all women and teenaged girls.”

She bit her bottom lip and furrowed her brow as if considering his suggestion.

“It’s a good class. No charge. No commitment.”

The knit over her eyebrows deepened. “And you know all this because ...?”

Jonah balked. If he told her the truth, that he served as the training aggressor for the class, would his participation be a deterrent because of her discomfort around him? In the class, he wore a full-body, padded suit including a helmet with a face mask so the women could practice the defensive strikes without injuring him. Annie didn’t have to ever learn he was involved in the class.

He opted for partial truth, hoping she’d forgive his sin of omission if she ever discovered his deception. “The lead

instructor is a friend of mine. She told me about the class.”

Before Annie could answer, Susan appeared at the diner door. “Annie, we need you. Orders are backing up.”

“I have to go,” Annie murmured, brushing past him.

He caught her arm, felt her tremble at his touch. “Please think about it. Even if this business with the stolen money comes to nothing, you need to be able to protect yourself.”

She set her shoulders and gave him a tight nod. “I’ll think about it.”

Thinking was a start, but not really enough. He had to convince her to take the class. Her life could depend on it.

Chapter 8

Annie's thoughts drifted to Jonah time and again throughout the day. She had to admit, even the little bit of information he'd given her last night about defending herself had been valuable. After weeks of being manhandled by Mr. Farrout, breaking his grip on her wrist this morning had been surprising. Exhilarating. Encouraging.

The idea of learning more from Jonah was tempting. But so was Jonah. Being around him at the diner, remembering how his defense demonstrations made her body hum and her knees weak, was difficult enough. She'd be crazy to purposely put herself in his proximity. In his arms. Alone. Even to learn self-defense, she couldn't justify torturing herself with something so ... Annie wiped her hands on her apron and chewed her bottom lip. What was the right word?

Forbidden? She certainly had no business taunting herself with a physical relationship that could never be. She had no room in her life for a man, and she didn't do one-night stands.

Confusing? Jonah's fighting skills, his brute strength and size contradicted the compassionate concern he'd shown her and his gentleness when he'd touched her. So who was the real Jonah?

Intimidating? More than her ever-present fear of physical violence, Jonah's uncanny ability to read her, to guess her motivations, predict her responses and see through her excuses

left Annie off balance.

"I wanted you to know I understood what you'd been through."

Even Ginny didn't claim to understand the turbulent emotions of Annie's abusive marriage, the terror, the self-doubt and self-recrimination. But Ginny had been raised in a healthy family, had a loving marriage to a wonderful man.

Jonah claimed he had experience with abuse, had grown up with a violent father. Was it possible he did understand her and the pain of her past?

"Yoo-hoo. Anybody home?" Susan asked, waving a hand in front of Annie and bringing her out of her deep reverie. "Table six is ready for his bill."

"Thanks." Annie pushed the distracting thoughts of Jonah aside as she flipped through her order pad and presented the businessman at table six with his check and an apologetic smile. "Sorry for the delay. Can I get you anything else?"

His gaze traveled slowly down her body and back up, lingering on her chest. "That's all today—" his focus shifted quickly to her name tag before he met her eyes "—Annie." He put peculiar emphasis on her name, and as he slid out of his booth, his grin could be better characterized as a smirk.

Annie returned to the counter, gritting her teeth. "Why do the smarmy guys always sit at my tables?"

"Luck of the draw. But you don't have a monopoly on scumbags." Susan took a couple of plates from the order window and sent Annie a commiserating look. "Just yesterday, I had a

guy in here *with his wife*, and he grabbed my ass.” She rolled her eyes and huffed in disgust as she carried the orders out to the dining room.

Annie did her best to shake off the heebie-jeebies the creepy businessman gave her and concentrate on her job the rest of the day. But thoughts of Jonah and his encouragement to take the self-defense class offered by the police department returned that afternoon when she left work.

On an impulse, Annie bypassed her bus stop and headed to the Lagniappe Women’s Center. The staff at the center, in particular her counselor, Ginny Sinclair, had been instrumental in helping her leave Walt sixteen months ago. Ginny and her husband, Riley, had risked their lives to save her and her children and had become dear friends of Annie’s. When Annie needed perspective, encouragement and straight answers, Ginny was always there for her.

Today, she needed a dose of Ginny’s honesty and understanding.

Annie smiled to the receptionist as she made her way to Ginny’s office door and knocked. Hearing Ginny call, “Come in,” Annie cracked the door open and peeked in.

Her blond-haired counselor cradled her phone to her ear but smiled broadly when Annie stepped into the office. She waved Annie to a chair and rocked forward in her seat. “Gotta go, babe. Annie just arrived. I will. Love you, too.”

Ginny sighed happily as she replaced the receiver, then lifted

a glowing grin to Annie. "Riley says hi."

Annie returned a smile. Ginny's newlywed bliss was palpable, and Annie couldn't be happier for her friends, though she experienced a pinch of envy for the contentment that radiated from Ginny's eyes. Would she ever find that pure joy with a man or would Walt always cast a shadow over her?

Taking a chair opposite Ginny's desk, she took a deep breath. "I know I don't have an appointment, but I was hoping you had a couple minutes. Something's happened."

Ginny frowned. "What's wrong?"

Annie explained about the attack in the alley and the stolen money, the possibility that the diner was the hub of illegal gambling and money laundering. "Jonah thinks I could be in danger. He wants me to take a self-defense class, and he—"

"Whoa." Ginny held up her hand. "Back up a second. Jonah? Who is that?"

Annie glanced down at her lap where her hands fidgeted. "He's a customer at the diner. A regular. He ... followed me the night I was supposed to make that delivery, and he ... defended me from the mugger. Probably saved my life." She squeezed her eyes shut, picturing Jonah's rugged face, his warm green eyes. Her stomach twirled and pirouetted dizzily, but, surprisingly, the sensation was not an unpleasant one. Instead, thoughts of Jonah stirred her pulse with the exhilaration of a carnival ride.

Annie huffed and forcibly tamped down the tingling reaction. She had no business indulging in any frivolous schoolgirl

distraction when her job, her life, her children's safety could well be in jeopardy. "Jonah ... has made himself my guardian. He's taken it upon himself to teach me to protect myself or see that I take a self-defense class. He wants to drive me to and from work, and he ..."

When she paused, Ginny said, "He sounds like a good guy to have on your side. So why do I get the impression you are less than thrilled?"

"I didn't ask for his help. Not that I don't appreciate his assistance the night I was mugged, but I ... I don't want ..."

Ginny leaned forward. "Spit it out. Don't edit your true feelings."

Annie took a deep breath. "I don't want to need him. I don't want to depend on him and get trapped in a relationship that's bad for me again."

Ginny picked up a pencil to doodle as she thought, a quirky habit Annie had grown familiar with in the past two years. "Is that where you think your association with him is headed? A romantic relationship?"

"I ... No. I didn't mean ... I just ..." Annie sighed. "I don't know. I'm not looking for a relationship right now. Truly. But if I'm honest—"

Ginny raised a palm. "Honesty is the best policy ... and all that jazz."

"I find myself thinking about him a lot. And I feel ... safer somehow when he's around." Annie sighed, then hurried to add,

“But that’s the thing. I don’t want to reach a point where I only feel safe with him around, where I depend on him for ... well, for *anything*.”

Ginny rubbed her chin, clearly weighing her response. “There’s a difference between being emotionally secure and self-reliant, and isolating yourself out of fear. Don’t be too quick to cut yourself off from people, Annie. We all need other people in our lives sometimes.”

Ginny’s gaze drifted to the wedding portrait on her desk, and the corner of her mouth lifted. “At its best, a loving relationship makes you a stronger, better person. The right man will complement you, not eclipse you. It’s about give and take, sharing and supporting each other. Being a team where both partners contribute the best of themselves.”

Annie stared at a knot in the hardwood floor of Ginny’s office. Had her marriage to Walt ever been a partnership where they complemented each other? From the beginning, Walt had taken the lead and made decisions about their future, their lifestyle, their finances. Annie had been left to follow ... or be forced into compliance.

“I only just got my freedom back, my independence. Getting into another relationship now seems ...” She fumbled for the right word.

“So don’t get into another relationship yet,” Ginny said. “That’s not what I’m telling you. Just don’t be afraid of building something special with a man because you’re afraid of losing

yourself again. Because the right man will help you discover all your best qualities, will support you and let you shine. Just like you'll do for him." Ginny laced her fingers. "Stronger together. A team."

Annie nodded, stashing the advice away to ruminate on later. "And the other stuff I mentioned? The mugging, the money laundering, the self-defense classes ... what am I supposed to do with all that?"

Ginny stabbed her desk with her finger. "Take the class. Knowing how to protect yourself is always a good thing. As for the money laundering ... I can call Libby Walters in the D.A.'s office if you want an official investigation opened."

Annie shook her head. "No. Jonah doesn't want to involve the local police yet. He's afraid one of the players will get wise to his investigation and all his work will be lost."

"But if there is something illegal and dangerous going on—"

Annie sat up straight, her mind made up. "Jonah is an ex-cop. I believe he knows what he's doing."

Somehow saying the words reassured her. She felt no hesitation defending Jonah's handling of the investigation. What did that say about her deepest, truest feelings?

Ginny arched an eyebrow. "You're sure? Because if you ever change your mind about this, you can call me, and I'll have Libby look into—"

Annie gave a tight nod. "I'm sure."

"And the mugging. How are you handling that? Any

nightmares? Trouble sleeping? Issues you want to talk out?"

"I've had ... a few flashbacks of Walt's abuse." Annie fingered the hem of her uniform skirt. "Especially seeing Jonah using his fists so effectively." She paused and glanced up at Ginny. "Did I tell you Jonah spars as a hobby? He fights for fun. For exercise."

Ginny scowled. "Has he given you reason to think he'll turn that violence against you?"

"Not yet. In fact, like I mentioned, he's encouraged me to learn self-defense."

Relaxing in her chair again, Ginny absently scratched another doodle. "So ... stay alert with him. Be watchful for signs he's dangerous, but ... give him a chance to prove his worth, too." She glanced up, and her gaze invited a response. "What else has been happening?"

Gnawing her lip, Annie thought about the creepy sensation of being watched on her way to work. "Well, I get the feeling someone is following me when I come and go from the diner. But that could just be paranoia."

"Just the same, be extra careful. Take Jonah up on his offer of a ride. Better safe than sorry, huh?"

A knock on Ginny's door interrupted them, and the receptionist poked her head in. "Sally Hendridge is here when you're ready."

"Thanks, Helen." Ginny rose from her chair and circled her desk.

Annie took the cue that the meeting was over and stood as

well, only to find herself drawn into Ginny's friendly embrace.

"Take care of yourself, Annie. And give those sweet kiddos of yours a hug from their aunt Ginny."

"I will." Annie backed out of the hug and picked up her purse. While Ginny made her feel more optimistic, in general, her friend had also given her a great deal to think about regarding Jonah.

Thinking in terms of a relationship with him was more than a little premature. Still, she reviewed everything Ginny had said as she left the women's center and headed to the bus stop.

Like that morning, the sensation of being watched dogged her on her trip home. She checked behind her numerous times, but never spotted any one person she considered a threat. But then her stalker, if there was one, wouldn't advertise his presence. Would he? Or was it, as she'd suggested to Ginny, merely her imagination and paranoia at work?

She tried to discount the odd feeling, but the next morning as she made her way through the predawn darkness to open the diner, the sensation returned in full force.

Finding the entrance to the diner unlit only heightened her jitters. Perhaps she should follow Ginny's advice and take Jonah up on his offer of a ride home. And she'd look into the Lagniappe PD's class, if for no other reason than to calm the jangling nerves that made her commute to the diner and back home so tense.

Annie fumbled to key the front door lock but discovered it was already open. Odd.

Grumbling under her breath about Mr. Hardin's multiple oversights in closing the restaurant the night before, Annie started a pot of coffee and headed to the kitchen to clock in and collect the cleaning supplies she'd need to prepare the restaurant for opening.

Instead, she found Hardin sprawled on the office floor in a puddle of blood.

When Jonah arrived for breakfast at Pop's, a swarm of cops milled around the entrance and crime scene tape barred the gathering of reporters and curious onlookers from entering the diner. His heart rose to his throat as a black body bag was wheeled out by the coroner and loaded in a hearse.

Panic squeezed his chest, and he struggled to recall the waitresses' work schedule he'd conned Susan into showing him, knowing Annie wouldn't share her schedule willingly.

Friday. Annie was slated to open the diner.

Dear God.

Adrenaline pumped through him, jangling his nerves. A cold sweat beaded on his lip as he searched the crowd for Annie's face.

Years of experience with crime scenes that should have allowed him some professional distance vanished. When someone you cared about was involved, objectivity flew out the window.

He spotted Lydia and shoved through the horde of reporters and cameramen. Seizing Lydia's arm, he spun her around. "What happened? Where's Annie?"

The gray-haired woman scowled at him and fought his grip until recognition dawned on her face. “Oh, Mr. Devereaux, it’s you. I thought you were another vulture reporter trying to exploit this tragedy for ratings.”

She huffed indignantly and sent a scathing look down the sidewalk to the aforementioned scavengers.

Jonah fought down the rising fear that coiled inside him, forced his voice to remain calm. “What tragedy, Miss Lydia? What happened?”

“It’s Hardin. Poor Annie found him shot dead in his office when she got here this morning to open the place.”

Relief that the body bag hadn’t been for Annie, and a gnawing concern for her trauma, tangled inside him.

Lydia shuddered and wrinkled her nose in dismay. “I can’t even imagine how grisly and horrifying that had to have been for her,” she said, mirroring Jonah’s thoughts.

“Where’s Annie now?” He cast another searching glance over the rubbernecking bystanders. “What happened to her? Is she all right?”

“Shook-up real bad, but not hurt.” The older woman’s face crumpled in sympathy. “Poor dear. Last I saw her, one of the cops had put her in the back of a cruiser to take her statement, get her out of the diner and away from the pushy reporters.” She aimed a finger down the block. “Over there.”

Jonah squeezed Lydia’s hand. “Thanks.”

He jogged down the street in the direction Lydia had pointed,

searching each of the numerous police cars for Annie. When he spotted her, a curtain of dark hair shielding her bowed face, her thin shoulders hunched forward, her body rocking rhythmically back and forth on the rear seat of a cruiser, his gut twisted. Her body language reflected abject misery and terror.

A suffocating urgency to reach her, comfort her, protect her, grabbed him by the throat. He darted around the cluster of uniformed officers holding court on the sidewalk and knocked on the car window. “Annie!”

Her head jerked up, eyes wide. A gray pallor leached her complexion. In seconds, the officers on the sidewalk assessed Jonah as a threat and seized his arms.

“Back off, sir,” one cop ordered as he hauled Jonah back from the police car.

Annie scrambled to find the door handle, beating it with her fists when she found herself trapped in the cruiser’s escape-proof backseat.

“That’s my girlfriend,” he lied. “I just want to talk to her! Can’t you see she’s upset?”

“She’s a material witness. Until the detectives question her—”

“I know the drill!” Jonah released his frustration on the uniform. “I was on the job in Little Rock for nine years! I just want to hold her, calm her down.” He shook free of the man’s grip and shoved past another cop blocking his path.

“Sir, you can’t—”

Jonah stuck his nose in the second cop’s face. “Look, pal, you

can stand right next to us and monitor our conversation if you want. We won't discuss the case. But I *am* going to let her out of that car." He met the officer's narrowed gaze with a dark glare of his own, then grated through clenched teeth, "Now get the hell outta my way."

With a determined stride around the cop, Jonah snatched open the cruiser door.

Annie lunged from the backseat and fell into his arms. "Jonah!" she gasped, her body trembling. "They killed Hardin! They shot him! Oh, God, Jonah."

He crushed her slim body to his chest, only to find his arms were shaking as much as she was. Just holding her, knowing she was safe, released the knot of tension that strangled him. He clung to her, stroking her back and sucking in deep restorative breaths.

"Oh, Jonah, it was horrible. There was blood everywhere, and his eyes—"

"Shh," he murmured into her ear. "Don't say anything now. We can't talk about the case until you've answered all the police's questions. Okay?"

She raised frightened eyes to his and nodded. A near-convulsive tremor shook her, and she dug her fingers into his arms.

"Is this my fault?" she rasped under her breath.

Jonah's gut clenched. "No!"

"But I—"

His grip tightened, and his gaze drilled into hers. “No! You can’t think that way.”

“We both know why this happened.”

Jonah cut a furtive glance to the cop standing a few feet away, listening. He had to keep Annie from saying too much, incriminating herself or blowing his investigation.

She shivered, near hysterics. “A-and I’m the one who lost—”

He kissed her. Just a quick collision of mouths. Not the deep, intimate kiss she deserved and he hoped he could give her someday, but enough to shock her into silence.

Enough to tell him her lips were every bit as soft and sweet as they looked. Enough to fire both his libido and his primal protective instincts.

She blinked. Gaped. Lifted a trembling hand to her mouth.

Guilt kicked him. Perhaps now, when she was already vulnerable, shaken by Hardin’s murder, wasn’t the best time to complicate his tenuous relationship with Annie. Even if the kiss kept her from incriminating herself in front of the eavesdropping cop.

Blowing out a cleansing breath, he turned to the cop. “When will she be done here? I want to take her home.”

The officer arched an eyebrow and flashed a suggestive I-just-bet-you-would grin. Jonah gritted his teeth, battling down the urge to wipe the smug look off the man’s face. But getting arrested for assaulting an officer would do Annie and his investigation no good.

“We just have a few more questions to ask her. She was in shock earlier, and we were giving her time to calm down.”

Jonah brushed the hair back from Annie’s cheek and gently massaged the tense muscles in her shoulders. “You feel up to some questions?”

Annie turned a wide-eyed glance to the policeman. “Can he stay with me?”

“Sorry. No.” When her face turned a shade whiter, the man hitched his head toward the sidewalk. “He can wait right there, though. This will only take a minute.”

Jonah took Annie’s icy hands in his and squeezed. “I’ll wait for you.” He brushed a soft kiss on her knuckles and backed away. “You’re strong, Annie. You can do this.”

Her expression, as she cut a glance toward the cop, said she didn’t agree.

Jonah leaned his back against the brick wall of the building next door to the diner and kept a close watch as Annie gave her statement and answered questions. He only caught snatches of the conversation. But having conducted more of these interviews than he liked to remember when he’d been on the force in Little Rock, he could fill in the blanks. Crossing his arms over his chest, he scanned the gathered crowd, scrutinizing faces, taking mental note of who’d come to rubberneck.

Could Hardin’s killer still be lurking in the area? Somehow he doubted it. The killing could have been a robbery gone bad, but he doubted that, too.

Annie's instinct that the killing was related to the cash delivery stolen from her was much more on the mark. But in this day and age, where money could be transferred from one account to another with the click of a mouse and the blink of a cursor, why deal with cash and messengered deliveries? The whole scenario reeked. He was certain the thief had been waiting for Annie, the delivery a setup to squeeze Hardin.

Was the head of the operation getting greedy, trying to eliminate the fringe players to keep more profit for himself? Had Hardin become a liability?

Jonah clenched his teeth. He needed more hard evidence soon so he could close his investigation, nail the bastards responsible. Before anyone else got hurt. Like Annie.

A cold ball of fear settled in his gut. Annie could easily be the thief's next target if he thought she knew too much.

Time to change tactics with Annie. She still needed to learn to protect herself, but Jonah wasn't about to leave her safety up to a few lessons in self-defense moves. Whether she liked it or not, he intended to stay at her side, watching her back until he knew the men responsible for Michael's death and Hardin's murder were behind bars—or dead.

Chapter 9

Cold permeated to her bones.

Annie rubbed her arms as she answered the cop's questions, but her hands did little to displace the chill that sank deep into her marrow. Hardin's lifeless stare haunted her whenever she closed her eyes. The metallic scent of blood overlaid by remnants of day-old grease lingered in her nose, churning her stomach with every inhaled breath.

"Do you own a gun, Ms. Compton?" the cop asked, jerking her attention back to the seemingly endless questions.

She blinked, stunned by the implication. Did they suspect *she* had killed her boss? That she had a motive to shoot Hardin?

And did it matter if she hadn't actually been the one to pull the trigger? Hardin was just as dead, and her careless loss of his money was why he'd been murdered. She knew that much with a horrifying clarity.

The icy numbness burrowed deeper. "N-no. I—I've never owned a gun."

"Do you have access to someone else's gun?"

She shook her head. "I didn't do this. I found him already ... dead."

The cop was clearly unmoved by her denial of guilt. He fired a few more questions before finally flipping his notepad closed and eyeing her dispassionately. "All right. That's it. You can go for

now, ma'am. But don't leave town. We may have more questions for you in the next couple days."

Annie nodded and wrapped her arms around her stomach, feeling she had to physically hold herself together or she'd shatter.

She glanced down the sidewalk to the spot where Jonah stood patiently waiting for her. Why turning to Jonah in this crisis felt right, she couldn't say, but when she'd seen him at the window of the police car, her relief had been immediate and immense. She'd held her breath as he fought to get past the officers blocking his path. She'd needed his calming comfort, his reassuring strength, and hadn't questioned why she'd instinctively known he'd come. As soon as the initial shock of finding Hardin dead had morphed into a bone-chilling fear for her own life, Jonah's had been the face she'd sought as the police gathered and morbidly curious crowds clogged the sidewalk.

Now he tucked her trembling body under his chin, his arms folded securely around her, and she let the tears she'd been holding at bay throughout the policeman's questioning wash down her cheeks.

His embrace was firm and reassuring without crushing her. The soothing strokes of his wide hand on her back eased the chaos and terror of the past hours. Nestled close to him again, she allowed her thoughts to drift back to the jolt that had shot through her when he'd surprised her with his kiss. More unexpected than the kiss itself was her body's electric reaction. If his intention had

been to scramble her thoughts and distract her from the situation, he'd succeeded nobly for several breathless seconds. The tender caress of his lips had spun a soothing warmth through her terror-chilled blood.

"When you're ready, I'll take you home," he murmured, his warm breath stirring the hair at her neck.

Home. Her children.

A fresh wave of icy horror flashed through her. She stiffened and jerked back to stare at Jonah in dismay. "My kids! What if the people who did this go after my kids?"

Nausea swamped her gut. If anything happened to Haley or Ben ... Jonah's grip tightened slightly, and he took her chin between his fingers and thumb. "That's not going to happen."

Frowning, she pulled her chin from his grip. "You don't know that. They could be at my apartment now!" She glanced to the cluster of policemen half a block away and lowered her voice to a harsh whisper. "I'm the one who lost that money. If they did this to Hardin, then why wouldn't I be next on their list?"

"I'm not denying that you could be in danger. But I promise you, I won't let them hurt you or your kids on my watch." The rough edge to his voice, the penetrating heat of his dark eyes rippled through her with concentric waves. Another tiny piece of her trust surrendered to his firm persuasion.

Jonah had bulldozed his way into her life and appointed himself her counsel and guardian. She knew so little about him, and what she did know was conflicting and confusing. By all

rights, she should be running in the other direction. She'd had enough of bossy, controlling men.

Yet Jonah's concern for her and her family seemed genuine. That alone was novel in her experience. Walt had been selfish, cared little for what his drinking and cruelty were doing to her and the children.

And Jonah had encouraged her to become self-reliant, empowered, confident. Walt had preyed upon her through fear and intimidation.

He nodded his head toward the parking lot. "My truck is over here."

She followed him to his pickup and climbed inside. As they drove to her apartment in silence, Annie's head pounded with questions, terrifying images of death and a numbing fear that she'd once more lost control of her life.

Jonah parked in a visitor's spot on the far side of the parking lot, and she climbed out of his truck. Relief poured through her when she spotted Rani and her children playing on the grassy quadrant between apartment buildings.

Jonah placed a proprietary hand at the small of Annie's back as they started across the crumbling asphalt.

Haley noticed her first, and her daughter's face brightened. "Mommy!"

She ran across the parking lot to intercept her mother, and Annie stooped, catching her little girl in a fierce, protective bear hug. Holding Haley, knowing her kids were safe, melted a layer

of the chill in her bones.

“How come you’re home, Mommy?”

“I ... just got the day off.” Clinging to her daughter, Annie inhaled the sweet scent of the baby shampoo Haley still used, and a rush of tender emotion washed through her. Her children were everything to her, and if she had to go into hiding again to protect them, so be it.

Haley pushed back from the hug. “Does that mean you can play with us? Can we play with my Barbies?”

Excitement and hope laced Haley’s voice, and joy lit her eyes.

“In a little while. I need to ... take care of a few things first.” Annie stroked her daughter’s hair and kissed her forehead. “But later, I promise to play Barbies with you.”

Her daughter grinned her satisfaction, then turned a curious look to Jonah, who’d stayed back as she greeted her daughter.

“Who are you?” Haley asked, wrinkling her nose.

Annie sent Jonah an apologetic glance. “Haley, if you want to meet someone, you introduce yourself politely. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” Haley scratched her nose and gave Jonah a measuring look.

Annie watched Haley’s reaction to him closely. Jonah was the first new man she’d brought around the kids since the ordeal with Walt came to a head more than a year ago.

He stepped forward and held his hand out for Haley to shake. “I’m Jonah Devereaux, a friend of your mom’s. Nice to meet you, Haley.”

Jonah's hand swallowed her daughter's smaller one, and an uneasy tremor fluttered through Annie, a reminder of how vulnerable her children were.

Rani had reached them with Ben in her arms, and she gave Annie a worried look. "Ms. Annie, is everything all right?"

"Well, yes and no. The diner had to close today unexpectedly. I can watch the kids today."

Rani gave her a brief update on what the kids had eaten and when Ben had woken up that morning as she passed the toddler over to his mother.

"I'll call you when I know what's going to happen tomorrow. My plans are kinda up in the air right now," Annie said. She sighed as Rani told the kids goodbye and headed toward her apartment.

If fearing for her life and her children's weren't enough, Annie hated the uncertainty this turn of events cast over her future. Would she have a job tomorrow? Would the diner close indefinitely? Would she have to leave Lagniappe to protect herself from the person who murdered Mr. Hardin?

As she herded Ben and Haley back toward their apartment, Haley stopped to play with the neighbors' cat. Eager to get the children inside, out of view of any eyes that could be watching her, stalking her, she opened her mouth to chastise Haley for dawdling.

But Jonah crouched beside Haley and joined her in stroking the cat's back. Annie paused, watching her daughter give the cat

solid thumping pats.

“Gently,” Jonah murmured. “See how he put his ears back? That means he’s unhappy. You don’t want to hurt him, right? Kitties like soft pats.”

Haley gentled her touch and tipped her head. “Like this?”

“Yeah, good.”

The lesson in kindness to animals caught Annie off guard. His concern that Haley not hurt the cat contributed to her confused feelings toward Jonah. She tried to reconcile Jonah’s fighting skills with this protective and loving attitude toward animals.

A shiver raced over her skin remembering how safe she’d felt in his arms when he’d gotten her out of the police cruiser. How could someone who sparred as a hobby, who didn’t hesitate to take on another man in a dark alley in hand-to-hand combat have such a gentle soul? The contradiction flew in the face of everything her personal experience taught her. She was risking a lot bringing Jonah home, exposing her children to him.

She prayed she didn’t regret taking the chance later. But she needed answers from Jonah, and the diner wasn’t safe for this particular discussion.

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