



Romantic Suspense
INTRIGUE



Be on the Lookout:
Bodyguard

Tyler Anne Snell

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Be On The Lookout: Bodyguard

Серия «Mills & Boon Intrigue»

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Аннотация

Protecting a woman who claimed she didn't need a bodyguard made his final case the most interesting of his career... Before he settles down behind the desk, Orion Security bodyguard Jonathan Carmichael has one last assignment. One that might prove to be more than he bargained for. Because Kate Spears is adamant she doesn't need his protection. And a woman who doesn't want a bodyguard could be difficult, dangerous—and terribly intriguing. Kate was used to taking care of herself. Unfortunately, her most recent scientific discovery made someone intent on taking her research and her life. Now, only one man stood between her and death. And while Jonathan was more than capable of protecting her body, she feared he could be the one man to wreck havoc on her very soul.

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“Don’t leave me!”

Every muscle that had been ready to spring to action hardened. Jonathan turned back to Kate. She wasn’t crying, but the way her beautiful dark eyes reached out to him let him know that she was close.

“Please, stay with me.”

It was in that moment that he knew there was no other place he wanted to be.

“It’ll be okay,” he said. “I promise.”

Sirens could be heard in the distance. The crying and yelling still sounded around them. For the first time since the car had nearly run them down, he realized the silver case hadn’t left Kate’s side.

She’d kept it with her through it all. What was in it?

And why was it worth killing for?

Be on the Lookout: Bodyguard Tyler Anne Snell



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TYLER ANNE SNELL genuinely loves all genres of the written word. However, she's realized that she loves books filled with sexual tension and mysteries a little more than the rest. Her stories have a good dose of both. Tyler lives in Florida with her same-named husband and their mini "lions." When she isn't reading or writing, she's playing video games and working on her blog, *Almost There*. To follow her shenanigans, visit www.tylerannesnell.com.

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This book is for Virginia Spears.

You're a beautiful, brilliant, hilarious sunflower. I hope we grow old together and can still make fun of all the silly things we did when we were younger. You're one of the best humans I know and, for that, you deserve much more than a dedication in a book. However, that's all I'm working with for now, so I hope this will do, you exotic, sparkling unicorn, you.

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[Chapter One](#)

He wouldn't tell anyone this, but the fight almost ended much differently.

The punch that landed squarely against his jaw almost knocked him out. Pain, bright and bold, exploded along the bone as the blow connected. It made him stagger to the side, and for a moment he struggled with fighting the urge to cradle the pain and seek refuge.

Or pass out. Blackness fringed the edges of his vision.

But Jonathan Carmichael wasn't that easy to take down.

He dropped low into a crouch and swung his leg around. His attacker wasn't fast enough to move out of the way. His legs were swept out from under him and he hit the ground hard. The wheeze of someone who had lost their breath escaped from his lips.

Jonathan wasn't where he needed to be physically—the punch really had done a number on him—but he knew the hired thug wasn't just going to lie down and take it. Plus, he still had someone to protect.

Out of his periphery, Jonathan saw the door behind him and to the left was still closed. Fleeting, he wondered if Martin actually locked the door like he had been told.

“You—gonna—gonna pay,” the thug started to wheeze out, but Jonathan didn't have time for a speech. He turned on his heel and leveled the man with his own knockout punch. The muscle-clad baddie didn't wage an internal war of whether or not he was going to slip into unconsciousness. Or, if he did, he didn't win

the battle.

His head clunked against the hardwood while the rest of his body relaxed.

“I’m gonna have a tall beer tonight,” Jonathan said, tenderly touching his chin. He winced. “That’s what I’m gonna do, all right.”

He nudged the guy’s foot with his work boot before feeling comfortable enough to walk back to the door his client was behind. Trying the doorknob, he cursed beneath his breath.

“Martin, I told you to lock this.”

His client, an older man who was five feet three inches of scatterbrain, didn’t offer an apology for not listening to his bodyguard. Instead his eyes widened at Jonathan’s appearance.

“You’re bleeding,” Martin exclaimed. He pointed to his eyebrow and then his lip.

“Don’t worry,” he hedged, temporarily forgetting he had other injuries. “It’s the jaw that hurts the worst.”

“And the bad man?” Martin didn’t try to see out into the other room. To him the hired gun was his own personal hell. An evil man who had threatened him, stalked him and attacked him. All in an attempt to exact revenge for sending his boss to prison. Jonathan remembered when the man had come into Orion Security Group’s front doors begging for protection, for a bodyguard to keep him safe. The police hadn’t believed he was being targeted, but Jonathan’s boss had.

A call Jonathan was grateful for and so was Martin.

“He won’t hurt you anymore.”

Martin’s entire body sagged in relief.

“Thank you, son. Thank you.”

Jonathan nodded, ignoring how the endearment struck a sore chord. Before he could stop it, the invisible wall that he had built for thirty-three years sprang up. He cleared his throat.

“Tell me you at least called nine-one-one,” he deadpanned. Martin’s eyes widened again, guilt written clearly across his face.

Jonathan let out a long breath.

“Call them while I go tie up our friend,” he ordered, pulling the zip ties from one of his cargo pants’ pockets. Martin nodded and for once listened.

The thug, a man around the same age as Jonathan but who had obviously had a much harder life, stayed unconscious while Jonathan tied his wrists together in front of his stomach. Just to be safe, he patted him down, revealing a wicked pocketknife and a wad of cash. There was no ID, but Jonathan didn’t need it. He felt as if he knew the man on some level. Fiercely loyal to his boss.

Hardened by life from the streets with scars that bore testament to that theory.

Determination unwavering.

Was he that different?

Would this have been Jonathan’s life had he not run into his current boss all those years ago?

Jonathan shook his head. He’d learned at a young age that

what-ifs did more harm than they ever did good.

“I called them—they’re on their way and a little confused,” Martin said from the doorway, eyes staying away from the man who had tormented him for months. “But then this man called?” He held Jonathan’s phone away from him with a shrug.

The bodyguard quickly took the phone, confused, as well.

“Carmichael here.”

“Why does the client have your phone?”

Jonathan cut a grin as the voice of one of Orion’s finest—and his closest friend—filled his ear.

“Well, look who it is! Mark Tranton, back from vacation.”

A chuckle came through the airwaves.

“Well, you couldn’t expect me to pass on a free weeklong stay at a beachside bungalow, could you?” Mark exclaimed.

“The old Mark would have,” Jonathan reminded his friend. “But the new Mark is a lot more fun, so I guess it’s understandable.”

“The new Mark also has two ladies who would never let him pass on a former client’s generosity like that,” the other man added with another laugh. Jonathan had known Mark for almost a decade and was glad to see his friend happy with his girlfriend and her young daughter. “Now, why did the client answer your phone?”

Jonathan gave his fellow bodyguard a rundown of the exchange from the moment the man picked the front door lock to the knockout minutes before Mark called. He could hear the

concern in Mark's voice as he questioned Jonathan's injuries, but Jonathan's walls were still up. He brushed the concerns off.

"The cops should be here soon, so I need to go," he started. "Wait, did you need something?"

"Yeah, but it can wait. Give me a call when you land in Dallas and I'll meet you at Orion."

Jonathan agreed to that and they ended the call.

The bodyguard slid his phone back into his pocket and took another long look at the man on the ground.

I could have been you.

* * *

TWO DAYS LATER Jonathan was cruising through Dallas, Texas, in the familiar comfort of his old, worn Range Rover. It was raining, but not enough to spoil his homecoming or Mark's insistence that he come straight to Orion's office. He wondered what all the fuss was about but didn't think on it too much as he puttered his way through afternoon traffic.

Before Orion he'd been an agent with Redstone Solutions, an elite and very private security agency. With more funding than they knew what to do with—and very little care for those who couldn't afford basic safety—he'd had contracts that had taken him all over the world. Orion, operating on a smaller financial but higher moral scale, still made him travel the nation. Through all of his travels, though, he could safely come to one concrete conclusion: traffic anywhere was horribly annoying.

There were some things he missed about his hometown, but

this wasn't one of them.

The rain let up by the time he reached the one-story building with its Orion Security Group sign blaring atop the front doors. Steam rose from the parking lot asphalt as he stretched. Unlike Mark or even Oliver, another close friend and Orion employee, Jonathan had a wide wingspan and stood taller than the two at six-three. Growing up, his long limbs had made him self-conscious—catching names like “String Bean” and “Stretch”—but being a bodyguard had taught him how to use his lean body to his advantage.

Strength and speed were two traits he trained hard to keep.

Orion's lobby had long windows tinted to keep the Texas sun at bay. It kept the lobby cool as Jonathan passed by the desk where their cyber-techy secretary, a young woman named Jillian, sat. At her absence, he felt a sort of alertness flare. Just because she wasn't in the lobby didn't mean he should think something ominous was going on.

Yet, as he walked through the door and down the hallway that led to the common area for employees, Jonathan couldn't shake the growing feeling of unease. Especially since he had passed empty offices belonging to Mark and Thomas, another Orion agent.

“Hello?” he said, rounding the corner to the grazing area, as he liked to call the open-area lounge for employees between the boss's office and the training room. Normally it was a comfortable space to relax or play a way-too-competitive game

of Ping-Pong, never too much action going on. So when he found it filled with people who yelled, “Surprise,” when he was in view, while a brightly colored banner that said Congratulations hung above him, Jonathan was wholly taken aback.

His eyes roamed over the many people bunched together. Among them he found Mark, his boss, in-house Orion employees and a few people he’d never met. He was sure he looked like a jackass standing there gaping.

“I don’t understand?” he asked when the cheers had died down.

An attractive woman with short, dark red hair laughed. She was Nikki Waters, founder and main boss at Orion, as well as one of his three closest friends.

“To be honest, this—” she motioned to the banner and then to the people next to her “—isn’t really for you, but we couldn’t resist trying to surprise you. Though, I guess it could count if we said, ‘Congratulations for a supremely well-done job of handling yourself this week!’” She held up a champagne flute—something he realized the other partygoers also held—and lifted it in the air. “To Jonathan Carmichael for an excellent job well-done!”

A chorus of “hear, hear” sounded.

“Thanks,” he said, still uncertain. “But who is this all really for?”

Nikki looked at Mark, who stepped to the side. Kelli, Mark’s girlfriend, showed herself.

“Us,” she answered before holding up her left hand. A ring

graced her finger, but it was the smile on Mark's face that really sold it.

"You're kidding me," Jonathan exclaimed, a smile as pure as they came pulling up the corners of his lips. "You two are getting hitched?"

They laughed in unison.

"You better believe it, best man!"

Jonathan's happiness for his best friend pushed him forward and he gave the many-muscled man a big hug. Mark, knowing Jonathan wasn't big on shows of affection, knew not to comment. Instead he returned it before passing the second embrace on to his future wife. The rest of the party went back to their own mingling as Jonathan took a step back to congratulate the two of them again.

"I wanted to wait to tell everyone after I'd told you, but this one here got a little too chatty." Mark looked at Kelli, who just laughed. A woman Jonathan didn't recognize pulled Nikki's and her attention away, leaving Mark and Jonathan alone.

"So should we talk about your face?" the bodyguard asked. Jonathan knew how it looked—a cut above his right lip, a bandage on his eyebrow and a gnarly bruise across his jawline—but he was happy that no one else had brought it up while he was in front of everyone.

"Don't worry, it feels worse than it looks," he joked. "So, best man, really?" Jonathan didn't want to keep talking about his previous job when he'd just been extended an honor that could

be taken as the epitome of male friendship. Mark clapped him on the shoulder.

“Who else would I pick? Now go put your stuff away and we’ll talk bachelor party ideas.” Mark wiggled his eyebrows. Once again it reminded Jonathan of how much happier his friend had become in the past year of being with Kelli and her daughter. Life, according to him, had become more enjoyable than even he had imagined.

A mixture of longing, sadness and regret exploded in Jonathan’s chest as he set his pack down behind his desk. From the open door he could see Kelli take Mark’s hand even though the two were in separate conversations.

Looking back Jonathan would realize that it was in that moment that he made his next decision, but while he was still in the moment he would think it was when Nikki walked into the room to give him a new client file.

“I don’t want to be a field agent anymore,” he responded, surprising the two of them. “I’m missing out on life, Nikki, and I don’t want to anymore.” She took a seat. Jonathan continued, “Mark’s getting married and already has a little family. Oliver has a kid on the way. I—” He struggled to find the words.

“Want to grow roots,” she supplied.

“Yes, but I can’t do that if I’m never in one spot for long.”

“So you want a desk job,” she added.

He nodded.

Nikki Waters wasn’t an easy woman to ruffle. She pursed her

lips but didn't try to sway his decision.

"Okay," she said instead.

"Okay?" He'd half expected her to be angry. Other than Mark he was the highest-ranking field agent.

"When I started Orion, I knew it would be a lot of work, and you've been an integral part in helping me carry that workload. That's included sacrificing your personal life, I've noticed. If you want to stay in one place, we can make that happen."

"So...that's it?"

Nikki held up her index finger.

"Now, I didn't say that."

Chapter Two

Kate Spears sighed as she looked down at the letter covered in blood. It, like the handful of others before it, was folded and had been placed squarely on the middle of her doormat.

Her father, Deacon, a man who was made of worry more than anything else, was lagging behind her, talking on his phone. His current worry that his wife, her stepmother, was having a less than good day at work rated low on the stress totem pole. But like his ability to worry, he took pride in being a good husband. So there he paced across the sidewalk next to Kate's mailbox, listening to his wife's woes as his daughter tried to figure out how to handle the bloody stationery.

"If this isn't a true case of the Mondays, I don't know what is," she muttered as she riffled through her larger-than-life purse. Unable to distinguish or adhere to the line between work and

home, she found the pack of latex gloves within seconds and pulled one on. In another pocket of her purse she found a clean baggie. Being a scientist had its perks.

“Okay, honey, love you, too,” Deacon said, suddenly closer. Kate panicked and stuffed the note into the plastic bag along with her latex glove as quickly as she could. The bag was then stuffed into the purse. All within seconds. It made Kate momentarily feel like she’d gotten away with something. Though, in hindsight, she would realize there were few things you could get past Deacon Spears. “Are we going to pretend that I didn’t just see you shove several things into your purse?”

Kate let out another long breath. While she didn’t always leave work at work, she didn’t want to bring this conversation home. Especially not during lunch with her father.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she lied, finally opening the front door.

“And there’s the higher pitch to your voice,” he pressed, following her into the entryway of her town house. Normally she would place her purse beneath the table next to the front door, but she kept it close to her side this time. Or else her father would already be going through it.

“Can you stop analyzing me? I’m not data, you know,” she said, grinning. While Deacon owned a hardware store, Kate still insisted on cheesy jokes from her field of work. He usually laughed at them. Not now. The fake mirth didn’t dissuade Deacon’s determination. He crossed his arms over his chest and

used the voice reserved only to scold his daughter. Never mind that she was twenty-nine, had a mortgage and had just completed a five-year project that could save countless lives.

“Kathryn Gaye Spears, I don’t know why you’re lying to me, but I do know you better cut the crap now.”

Kate physically shied away from the accusation by moving down the hallway and into the kitchen. Her hand clung to the strap of her purse as if the contact would somehow help it magically know it needed to hide until lunch was over.

“Dad, do you want some coffee?” she hedged. “I really need some.” Deacon followed silently and stood like a statue next to the refrigerator. From growing up with him, Kate knew it was a matter of minutes before his steely resolve broke hers, but Kate was also stubborn. She met her father’s blue-eyed stare with her own brown-eyed one and was reminded in full how the two of them looked nothing alike.

Short yet solid, Deacon had been blessed with a hereditary tan from his half-Hispanic mother, but had his father’s once blond-white hair—even though it was sparse at the crown around an almost shiny bald spot. Besides his overall look that just cried “retiring in Florida,” the fifty-six-year-old had a young, slightly rounded face. One that was partially hidden by another sun-bleached mustache he said his wife Donna thought made him look regal.

Kate, on the other hand, was the spitting image of her mother. Before her death, Cassandra Spears had been taller than her

husband when she wore high heels—though she never did—and much leaner. In the same respect that was true for Kate. At five-nine, she could see over Deacon’s head with heels—though she also wasn’t a fan—and was lean but without the muscles that had been a necessary part of Cassandra’s job in law enforcement. Kate also shared the rich brown hair her mother had once sported, waving to her shoulders with thick bangs across her forehead, and her mother’s teardrop face and full lips. The only way she differed from either parent was the less than active tan that graced her skin. In the last five years Kate had resided in labs or over her computer screen during almost all waking hours. There was no time to go outside and play in the sun for her.

Though, as her father’s stare bored holes into her own, Kate thought a break for the park might be better than what was about to happen.

“It’s really not that big of a deal,” Kate finally conceded. “Can’t you just let me deal with it?”

Her father shook his head with a firm no.

Defeated, she put her purse on the counter and pulled out the baggie and its contents.

Alarmed wasn’t a strong enough word for Deacon’s reaction.

“Is that blood?” he asked, voice a mile past concerned. Careful not to rumple the letter inside, he took the bag and set it on the counter.

“It’s made to look like it, but if it’s like the last one it’s

synthetic.” His eyes widened.

“The last one? You mean you’ve gotten one before this?”

Kate gave one more sigh. She’d hoped to avoid this conversation with her father until after her trip, when she was sure the letters would stop altogether. Sitting on one of the bar stools opposite him, she explained.

“Over the last few months I’ve received a handful of letters here and at the office,” she admitted. “Only this one and the last one were covered in what looks like human blood, but we tested and confirmed it to be fake. Though, I still wouldn’t touch that without gloves on.” She pulled another set out of her purse and passed them to her father—a man curious enough to want to pull the letter out. Silently he slipped them on and did just that. Kate quickly put down a paper towel so the blood—fake or not—wouldn’t touch the granite.

“It’s covered front and back with writing,” he observed, squinting at the handwritten letters. It was identical to all of the other notes she’d received. “But it’s only one word, repeated. Zastavit.” He kept saying the word, as if tasting it to figure out its root.

“I think it’s Czech,” she said after a moment.

“Are you sure?”

She shrugged. “No, but I can guarantee it means ‘stop.’”

His eyebrows rose in question.

She held up her index finger and made a quick trip to her bedroom. There she picked up a small box and brought it back

to her father. Sitting back down, she waited for him to open it and extract the bundle of letters.

“Only a handful of letters? How many hands are you talking about in this scenario?” The letters numbered eighteen in total. Each had a single word repeated over the paper’s entirety.

“They are all in different languages, but they all roughly translate to the word stop,” she explained. “Plus, the first one was in English. I suppose to help me out just in case I didn’t understand...or, you know, use a translator or the internet.”

“Stop...stop what?” Realization lit his features before Kate had time to answer. “Your research.”

She shrugged. “I suppose so. That’s the only thing I really have going on in my life. Unless they want me to stop drinking coffee. Which, I’ll be frank, isn’t going to happen anytime soon.”

“Dammit, Kate!” Her father slammed his free hand down on the counter, making her jump. “Stop joking about this!” He waved the note closest to him—the Hungarian one—in the air. “These are threats, not some love letters. Someone obviously invested a lot of thought and time into these.”

“But they aren’t threats, Dad,” she insisted. “They are simply eclectic suggestions. No threat of harm has been given in any of them.”

“But they’ve been delivered to your home, Kate!”

“And that’s what I told the cops after the second one I received.”

He was surprised at that.

“What did they say?”

“Exactly what I just said. They aren’t really threats and nothing else has happened. They suggested putting a camera on the front porch, but...” She quieted.

“But what?”

“But I’ve been so busy preparing for the convention that I keep forgetting.” Her father seemed to be trying very hard to keep his anger at his daughter’s apparent lack of concern under control. He placed the letters back in the box and the newest one back into its bag. He slid that one over when done.

“You will test this as soon as possible to make sure it is in fact fake. I am calling in to the store and taking off the rest of the day. Make me that coffee you mentioned.” He picked the box up and walked to the eat-in table. “I’m going to look through all of these in silence while I try to figure out what I did to deserve such a stressful child.”

* * *

KATE PINCHED THE bridge of her nose and hoped the pain behind her dark brown eyes was a tease and not the beginnings of a headache. Sprawled out on her bed, amid her suitcase and carry-on, she called upon every entity there was and begged that the headache would stay far, far away.

She didn’t need any more complications than she was already dealing with.

“Having a bodyguard is not that big a deal,” her father said from the doorway. Since learning about the notes a week ago,

she'd had constant supervision and parental advice. "Stop being such a baby!"

Kate, often referred to as brilliant by her supervisor, stuck out her tongue before responding.

"I'm not being a baby," she retorted, trying to keep the whine from her voice. "I think I'm reacting normally given the circumstances."

"Most daughters would be grateful, you know."

She laughed.

"Most daughters don't have their fathers go behind their backs and hire bodyguards to supervise their trips to life-changing work functions!"

He managed to look momentarily guilty before shooting back with a response. "Well, most daughters don't—" He held up his hand, stopping himself. "Listen, we can sit here and fight about this all day while you lie next to your empty luggage, or you can just take the gesture with graciousness and understand that I only have one baby girl and that's you." His voice took on an edge that Kate recognized as vulnerability from the almost always strong man. It killed the less-than-nice reply she'd had waiting on the tip of her tongue. He walked over and took a seat next to her. She sat up to look him in the eyes.

"It's because of that fact that I can say this without getting into trouble," he started. Kate swallowed, unsure whether or not she was about to get into more trouble. However, when he continued, his voice was kind. "You've spent most of your

life fighting to help people you'll never meet by doing research and working tirelessly in labs. Along the way you've achieved a level of greatness I never could have, and for that I'll be forever proud... But your drive—your dedication—often puts blinders up, making it hard for you to see the big picture. While your research is important, you are, too. You've tried to keep your work a secret, but what have I told you about secrets?"

"They don't exist."

He smiled.

"Someone will always tell someone else. It's the law of the land. And one that your mother tried to teach us. Someone obviously knows something, and whether or not it's the truth or some half-baked version of it, they have set their sights on you. Now, you've told me this convention will change everything. Well, I want to make sure you're there to see that through and continue to see it through long after it's over. Because even though you won't see the big picture—and its danger—I'll tell you right now that it's there." He patted her knee. "So, please, accept this protection, if only to give your old man some peace of mind."

Kate watched as a range of emotions played across her father's face. It reminded her of all the sacrifices he'd had to make to raise her on his own since she was nine. Never once asking anything of her.

Until now.

"Because I love you and can see your point, I'll make a deal

with you,” she offered. “I will humor you by accepting the protection of only one bodyguard. Any more than that will bring unwanted attention and, well, freak me out a little. So one and that’s it, okay?”

He looked like he was ready to fight her again, but after a moment he nodded.

“Okay.” He stuck out his hand to shake. “Deal.”

They shook and she rolled her eyes. Their tender moment dissipated as he stood and stretched.

“Now, I have to ask, how exactly are you paying for this bodyguard service?” Like Kate, her father wasn’t particularly wealthy. He worked at the hardware store he and his wife of five years owned.

“I was lucky enough to get connected to a place that works for free on cases they believe need it. One of my customers worked a news story for them when he lived in Dallas and was kind enough to give me a reference.” He grinned.

“Oh, so they’re amateurs, then.”

“Definitely not. Their track record is impressive, to say the least,” he answered. “Don’t worry, I vetted them pretty well.”

“So why exactly are they doing it for free?” she asked, perplexed. Deacon smiled wide.

“I guess that’s a question you’ll just have to ask your bodyguard.”

[Chapter Three](#)

Traffic.

Here it was again.

Jonathan looked out his rental's window and snorted.

“Welcome to New York City,” he said to himself.

He'd been stuck in standstill traffic for the last half hour thanks to a fender bender that had escalated to the point of the cops being called. It had made the two lanes of traffic that had been moving along nicely stop dead.

Unnecessary. Annoying. Unpleasant.

It probably didn't help that he could use all three descriptors for his current client, Kathryn Spears. Instead of waiting for him at the airport like Nikki and the woman's father had agreed on the night before, Jonathan had landed to a voice mail from her saying she'd gone ahead to the hotel.

Because, in her words, “I really need some better coffee.”

After ten more minutes of waiting, traffic finally started to pick up again. Jonathan had spent the time while he waited going over the route to the hotel in an attempt to not get lost. He'd been to New York before and he knew the frustration of getting turned around this close to Times Square. Thankfully he avoided any misdirection, a feat considering if he had missed the turn into the hotel's parking garage—an almost hidden entrance due to the sidewalk that was barely sloped for a car to drive up—he would have had to take a series of left turns until he made his way back. Costing him more time away from fulfilling Orion's end of the contract.

He parked, sent a text to Nikki to let her know he'd finally

gotten in and collected his bag. It contained a suit, pressed and folded, along with a myriad of pristine yet flexible clothing. It was light but had everything he needed for the Friday-through-Tuesday stay—not the longest contract he'd done nor the shortest. But, as he'd told Nikki, it would be his last. In his mind he went over the layout of the building as he rode up in the elevator. Above the parking garage, there were four floors. A lounge area branched off the lobby on the first floor with guests having access to a twenty-four-hour gym. There were two sets of stairs on opposite sides of the building with two elevators positioned next to them, diagonal from the lobby front desk. The front entrance led directly to the sidewalk that ran along the street.

Jonathan hadn't stayed at the dismal pink-painted hotel before, but Jillian had walked him through its layout before he'd left. It was nice to know what he was going into versus going in blind. Orion agents prided themselves on being prepared—though that wasn't always easy, considering people often did surprising things—and since Orion's expansion three years ago they'd gotten better at it. Even when a contract changed at the last second.

He looked at his reflection in the elevator door and let out a grunt. Not getting the best sleep the night before and catching an early flight, he hoped the client didn't notice the dark circles beneath his eyes. He blamed the chatty man who'd had the aisle seat next to him. It made him wonder if Kathryn was like that,

recalling what he had been told initially by Nikki at Mark's engagement party.

"I wouldn't ask you to take this one, since, for one, you just got back, and, two, you just asked for a desk job. But the man requesting our services was so concerned...I could almost feel it myself." Nikki's eyes had traveled to the wall at that. It was a blank space, but he knew on the other side was her real target. A single picture of a young woman. The reason behind Orion's origin. The woman who had changed their lives, whom Nikki, Oliver, Mark and Jonathan couldn't have been what they were now without. The woman they hadn't saved. "He lives in Florida but heard about us through one of Thomas's recent clients. His daughter has been receiving some really troubling letters."

"His daughter?"

"Yes, a scientist—book smart but maybe not exactly up to par on the common sense. Her father, Deacon—what a name—says she's pretty nonchalant about the whole thing, but he's completely freaked. She's due to present her research at a convention in New York City on Sunday and he's worried the person or persons sending her the letters—to her home, I might add—might try to cause her harm before she can make it there."

"And that's where we come in."

"Hopefully that's where you come in."

Jonathan respected his boss and friend too much to turn the request down on the spot. Though he had been on the fence about it until the next day.

When she'd shown him the pictures of the letters Deacon had faxed over, they'd made a chill run up his spine despite his calm.

“Okay, I'm in.”

And he'd stayed in even after the call had come in that said scientist refused to have more than one bodyguard around. Never mind her safety was in question.

The doors slid open and Jonathan made his way to check in with a suddenly sour mood hanging over his head at the thought of Kathryn Spears. Other than the basic information about her, he really didn't have much to go on, but he had already formed an opinion about her.

She was controlling, apathetic and had an ego. There were no doubts about it.

“Welcome, and how may I help you?” chirped the front desk attendant. He looked to be in his early twenties. His name tag read Jett.

Jonathan set down his bag and started to take out his ID.

“Check-in for Jonathan Carmichael.” He passed his driver's license over as well as the company credit card, having done the hotel check-in dance many times before. Another part of this routine was his next question.

“Can you tell me if my friend has checked in yet? The name's Kathryn Spears.”

The man looked back up and without missing a beat nodded.

“About an hour ago.”

That surprised Jonathan.

“You remember her?” he asked.

“Yeah, the first thing she did was ask for coffee that was actually good.” Jett didn’t seem to be offended by the question. “I sent her to a café a block over.” His eyes went over Jonathan’s shoulder. “I guess she found some.”

Jonathan didn’t have to follow the man’s gaze too far. Walking through the front doors, Kathryn had a cup between her hands and no trace of a smile across her lips. She met his stare with recognition he didn’t expect and made a beeline for him.

“Mr. Carmichael,” she said, stretching out her free hand. There was no question in the greeting. “Glad to see you finally made it.”

Despite himself he grinned.

“Miss Spears, glad to see you were able to get that coffee that was so important.” They shook and he was once again surprised by the woman. Not only was her grip firm, but she held it longer than necessary, squeezing tight as she answered.

“Two coffees, actually.”

They dropped hands but his grin stayed. Even though he’d been shown her picture before he’d left Orion, the still of the woman sitting behind a desk covered in papers didn’t do the woman before him justice. She was attractive, sure, but there was something else there that caught and held his attention. An unspoken element that he couldn’t yet place or define.

Suddenly, Jonathan Carmichael was intrigued by his client.

“I would have waited for you,” she continued, voice notably

cool, “but I’ll be honest, I think you being here is a bit unnecessary.”

Jonathan let out a laugh at that, considering earlier he had thought the same about her.

“Don’t you want to play it safe rather than be sorry?” he asked.

Kathryn’s lip quirked up at the corner. Her smile wasn’t humorous.

“I’d rather not have to worry about a bodyguard following me around everywhere, watching my every move while I get ready for one of the largest career moves of my life.” She popped her hip out to the side a fraction, he noticed. “That would be my choice if I’d been given one.”

Jonathan couldn’t decide if the way she spoke was born out of ego or frustration, but he definitely felt a chill wafting from each word. Part of him instantly felt the need to defend his skills and the company that was more than just his employer but an important part of his life. However, Jett was obviously still listening in, so the bodyguard went a more judicious route.

“The Orion Security Group doesn’t force clients to hire them,” he pointed out. “It was your father who did that, and you consented. As for watching your every move while I’m on the job, I can assure you that—if I’m doing said job correctly—my eyes won’t be on you but on your surroundings, trying to keep you safe. So if you have a problem with this arrangement, it’s your father—and really, yourself—you’ll need to be speaking with.”

Kathryn didn’t immediately respond. When she did it was

clipped, definitely chilly.

“Noted. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to do some work up in my room.”

She started to turn to go—already testing the boundaries of his job as her bodyguard—when Jonathan smiled once again.

“Hey, I’ll walk with you on the way to mine.” She gave him a questioning look. “Oh, didn’t your dad tell you? He requested we have adjoining rooms.”

Jonathan might not have known the scientist long, but he knew he’d struck a nerve with that comment.

It was going to be an interesting few days.

* * *

KATE DIDN’T WANT to wait for the bodyguard. No matter how attractive he’d turned out to be. The picture she’d been forwarded from her father and Orion’s Nikki Waters had shown her a lightly tanned man who looked like a stock image a website might use to show an everyman, not a bodyguard. He had seemed flat, one-dimensional. Someone who would easily blend into the background and, hopefully, not bother her.

However, in person she’d been surprised to see that maybe she’d misjudged him in that department. His dark blue eyes had depth, his facial features were sharp and his goatee was trimmed and neat, matching the jet-black hair that stood an inch or two high. He wore a gray tee and jeans and he wore them well. When he turned back to the desk attendant, she even spotted the bottom of a tattoo on the back of his upper arm, peeking out under his

sleeve.

Maybe Jonathan Carmichael wasn't the type of man to blend.

"This is a massive invasion of privacy," Kate commented as she led them into the elevator. Like the hotel, it was dated. She pressed the second-floor button and hoped above all hopes that it didn't get stuck. Her nerves had been rubbed the wrong way, annoyed at her father and the man next to her. Getting trapped in the small space with him would most likely incite a flurry of rudeness from her. She was already having a hard time being polite without the added close proximity.

"Again, I'll remind you that your father hired Orion and you agreed," he said, not looking at her but obviously surveying the elevator. He was tall enough to reach up and push against the ceiling—trying to do what, she wasn't sure.

"I meant the adjoining-room situation," she corrected.

Jonathan stopped his inspection and gave her a dry smile.

"Just because there's a door there doesn't mean I'm going to use it. I don't even have a key. We just wanted the rooms to be close, and since it's an older hotel they just happen to share a door." His eyebrow rose. "Unless you want me to get you a key?"

Kate felt heat crawl up her neck.

"No," she said quickly. "I don't need or want one."

"Good. Then there shouldn't be a problem."

The elevator doors slid open and Kate hurried with her coffee to her room down the hall. Jonathan was right behind her with his bags.

“I’m going to look in your room, okay?” he said as she pulled out her key card. “I’d like to know the layout, just in case.”

Kate wanted to argue, but was trying to channel her inner Spears’ manners. She still rolled her eyes.

“Sure, why not?” She opened the door and swung it wide for the bodyguard. “Knock yourself out.”

He moved past her, bags still in hand, into the room. For a moment she worried about her more intimate things being left out in the open, but it was a baseless fear. She was meticulous, a trait that had bled over from her professional life into her personal one. She’d already unpacked and sorted her things.

“To be honest, I expected something different,” Jonathan said, apparently okay with his inspection.

“Something different?” she repeated. “Like a man in a mask lying in wait?”

The corner of his lips pulled up a fraction.

“I meant I expected to see, I don’t know, test tubes and beakers on the nightstands. Aren’t you a scientist?”

Kate walked over to the small desk in the corner and leaned against it. She felt a twitch try to pull her own lips into a small smile, but she tamped it down.

“Generally labeled, yes, I suppose.” She took a sip of her coffee. “What else do you know about my work?”

If Jonathan knew about her project, she was sure she’d have seen some kind of reaction to her question. However, the man simply shrugged.

“If you’re asking do I know what you’re currently working on—why you’re here for the convention—I don’t. Orion tries to look into a client’s life without being intrusive. Our analysts dip into your past and present to try to find potential threats, but we don’t overstep. Your father and Nikki made it clear that, as far as your work goes, the only person who can tell me about it is you.” He paused, tilting his head slightly. “And I suspect that that information is something you won’t be sharing with me.”

Before Kate could stop it, the image of a bloodied woman tied to a chair flashed across her vision. Head bent over, body beaten. Her last breath having already left her body hours before.

The image was something she’d had to confront for a long time. It twisted the very core of her heart.

“No,” she said, voice turned to ice. “I won’t.”

Chapter Four

Jonathan wasn’t invited to stay past the woman’s answer. He didn’t want to, either. Kathryn’s voice had gone steely, her eyes almost to slits, and even from his spot across the room he’d been able to see her breathing change. Whatever she’d just experienced, it pulled his curiosity to the forefront, but he kept his mouth shut. What was behind her dark eyes was something darker. Something he had no business seeking out.

His room was to the right and was an exact replica of hers. The adjoining door was placed between the desk and the dresser with its TV on top, locked tight with a key card swipe on the handle. It was true he didn’t have the key to it, but he doubted he’d be able

to get one if he wanted it. Kathryn Spears wasn't hiding the fact that his presence was something she neither wanted nor thought she needed.

"Hey, Nikki, this is Jonathan," he said into his phone after he'd unpacked, leaving a message after the beep. "Just made first contact with Miss Scientist. Let me say, you picked one hell of a last contract for me."

Jonathan unpacked quickly, not as neatly as he'd noticed said scientist's room to be, and reflected on what he knew about the woman next door. He hadn't been lying—it wasn't much. Nikki had received the reports from the analysts and made the decision to only tell him what he needed to know in an effort to preserve some of Kathryn's privacy. What Jonathan knew was that the scientist was dedicated to her work and that work was a secret.

But that didn't mean he wasn't curious as hell as to what it entailed.

A quick knock on his door pulled him from his thoughts. He was surprised to see Kathryn standing on the other side. Her expression had softened, but only slightly.

"I want to apologize for being frosty," she greeted him. "I just, well, my work is a sensitive topic and this convention is very, very important for my career. My father tells me that sometimes I tend to get a little too into the zone and can lose sight of my manners." Jonathan hadn't expected an apology. "So, why don't you come with me to the Chinese restaurant a few blocks down and we can get reacquainted?"

“I appreciate the offer, but you know as part of my job I’d go anyway,” he pointed out. Kathryn gave him a wry smile.

“I’m inviting you to eat with me,” she corrected. “Not sit creepily behind me like a weird stalker.”

Jonathan stepped back to retrieve his wallet and walked out into the hall. As she shut the door, he snorted.

“You apologize and then call me a stalker. I feel like you don’t often apologize to people.”

Kathryn crossed her arms over her chest, smile gone.

“I don’t.”

The walk down to the lobby and out to the street was silent. Their conversation hadn’t stalled. It had stopped completely. Jonathan walked at her side but kept his eyes in a constant sweeping motion of their surroundings. It was late afternoon and the streets were packed even tighter than when he’d first driven in. Gaggles of pedestrians crowded the corners of blocks and only half waited for the Walk sign to flash green before darting across the street. Jonathan wondered if Kathryn had been to the city before. She walked with purpose and little doubt. Jonathan followed without question or comment.

Two blocks from the hotel, they hung a left into a small, one-room Chinese restaurant. It was dark and surprisingly quiet despite the street noise. The handful of patrons paid them no mind as they slid into a booth against the wall. Before they could settle in, a man took their drink orders. Jonathan checked his sight line to the door again and then decided to break his client’s

quiet.

“So you’ve been here before?” he asked, motioning around them. “Which means you’ve been to New York before?”

“Yes, to both. An associate who is based in Buffalo frequents a lab here and commutes just to eat the chicken fried rice when in the city.” She shrugged. “Not the healthiest traveling diet, but I had to admit I was impressed the last time we ate here.” Kathryn paused before smirking. “And I’m somewhat of a fast-food queen back home, so take my word for it as a weighty stamp of approval.”

“Noted.” The timing couldn’t have been better for the waiter. He came for their orders and Jonathan decided to test out the scientist’s theory. He ordered the chicken fried rice.

“So home, that’s in Florida?” he asked, eyes scanning the new couple who’d just entered.

“Yes, where the humidity is king. I’ve lived there almost all of my life, with the exception of school.”

“You moved back when finished, then?”

She nodded.

“Out of graduate school I was offered a somewhat rare job at a lab that was located near my father.” She shrugged. “At the risk of sounding like a child who can’t crack it without their parent nearby, I couldn’t have hoped for a better setup. I love my father dearly, so back to Florida and its god-awful heat I went.”

Though it was out of sight, Jonathan felt the burn of the tattoo on the back of his arm. Not a physical pain, but a memory that

often flared to life when the past swarmed him.

“There’s nothing wrong with staying close to family,” he said, truth in each word but no experience within them.

“And what about you, Mr. Bodyguard? Where’s your home?”

A simple question and one he had fielded time and time again.

“I moved around a lot growing up. Never in one place for too long.” He shrugged. “When Orion started up in Dallas, I decided that I liked that city best. As someone who’s traveled the world for the job, you can take my word for it ‘as a weighty stamp of approval.’”

She smiled. Jonathan wondered how often she used that expression.

“Noted. You know, I’ve done some research of my own on Orion Security, and I must say that as a service of bodyguards, it has a fascinating track record,” she began, lacing her fingers atop the table. Jonathan had wondered when she’d bring up Orion’s history. He’d had no doubt that a woman whose life was so poised in research would do her own. He sat up straighter and nodded.

“We’ve had a few interesting cases.”

“Ha! Interesting? If I recall correctly, last year one of your fellow bodyguards was instrumental in bringing down an underground drug-running organization that the police had no idea existed.” Jonathan shrugged but couldn’t stop the smile that sprung to his lips. The bodyguard to whom she was referring was none other than Mark Tranton. What she didn’t know was that the media had been forced to keep the identity of his equal

partner in crime, his now-fiancée, Kelli, and her daughter out of the public eye.

“Each case—each client—is always interesting. It’s just part of the job.” Kathryn seemed put off that he hadn’t divulged more, but she clearly wasn’t done with the topic.

“I also found a newspaper article about a woman named Morgan Avery,” she said after a moment. Her expression softened just as Jonathan felt his body tense. At the moment he realized maybe he shouldn’t underestimate the woman sitting across from him. While Morgan Avery was in no way a secret, it was a truth rarely connected to the agency. When he didn’t respond, Kathryn took it as a sign to continue. “You used to work for Redstone Solutions, elite bodyguards, if I read their bio correctly. Morgan came to Redstone for protection but was turned away.” Jonathan felt his hand start to fist. He moved it to his lap. “You quit a few weeks after she was killed.”

He didn’t know if it was her lack of questions that put him so suddenly on edge or if it was hearing the history of Morgan made so brief. Especially when her death had created an inexplicably vast chain of events that had so completely altered his life, as well as the lives of those he cared about most. Kathryn’s eyes had narrowed a fraction. A researcher studying a subject. A scientist seeking answers. If he didn’t answer in some part, he was sure she wouldn’t let it go. Plus, how long had it been since he’d talked about Morgan?

“I was on a team of three. We were in the office, just having

come off two back-to-back contracts, when she first came in,” he started. “Young, beautiful and utterly brilliant. She was an astronomer in training who had won a spot in a prestigious program in England. It was a pretty cutthroat competition, and after she won it, she started getting threats. So bad, in fact, that she contacted us. Like you said, Redstone was viewed as a security service for the elite.”

“Which translates to money, and I’m guessing she didn’t have any,” Kathryn supplied.

“She was a student—she had nothing to give. So she was turned down multiple times. Even when our office’s secretary went to the higher-ups on her behalf. She didn’t have the money. So we didn’t protect her.” An image of Morgan’s body in a ditch, beaten almost beyond recognition, flared in his memory. Guilt and anger followed. “She was killed on the way to the airport by a man who wanted her spot. It was her original fear, and it came true.”

“And then Nikki Waters founded Orion?”

It took a moment, but the chill of the past slowly heated. They’d made it to the part of the story that was no longer dripping with regret. He nodded.

“Nikki was the secretary at Redstone. After Morgan’s death, she refused to work for a company that valued money over people and decided to use her contacts to create an agency that never would make that mistake again. She approached me and the team I was on and asked us to come with her.” He shrugged. “So Mark,

Oliver and I did. We've been there ever since."

The tattoo on the back of his arm came to the forefront of his mind. His dark mood was gone.

"You know, my mother once told me that some of the most noble pursuits begin with some of the most senseless tragedies," Kathryn said after a moment had passed. "While I don't feel I need Orion Security's protection, I see the value and heart behind what you're doing." She gave him another rarely used smile just as their food came out. Jonathan was stunned by the absolute sincerity that seemed to be behind her words. One moment she was calculated, somewhat tactless, and the next she was insightful and empathetic. Certainly one of the most interesting clients he'd had in a while.

* * *

THEY ATE THEIR food quickly and, soon after finishing, they were singing its praises.

"I'll have to let Greg know the food is still fantastic," she said. "This fast-food queen will be coming back here before I leave."

"Greg?" Jonathan asked.

"Oh, sorry. Greg is the work associate I was telling you about. If you insist on following me around the entire trip then you'll get the chance to tell him, too. I have a meeting with him tomorrow morning."

Jonathan's brows drew together.

"There was no mention in your itinerary about a meeting tomorrow," he said, most likely trying to recall the schedule she'd

sent to her father, who had sent it on to Orion. Kate couldn't help it. Tension rose fast and fierce, straightening her shoulders. She pursed her lips. For a moment she'd forgotten her annoyance at the bodyguard's presence.

"That's because I didn't include it in my itinerary."

She stood and left the table to pay at the podium near the door. His next question was going to be why, and the only answer she could give would create more questions. Ones she couldn't answer.

Jonathan didn't berate her as they left the restaurant and made their way back to the hotel. In fact, he had gone silent as he trailed the space beside her, yet kept his distance. It gave her a sense of being alone. One that was shattered when he moved close with a whisper that nearly tickled her ear.

"Let's pause for a second, please."

Kate did as she was told and turned to the man, confused.

"I can see the hotel from here," she pointed out.

Jonathan grabbed her arm and pulled her backward with him. Not ready for the contact, she started to pull away when he spoke again. "I think we're being followed." His gaze cut behind her. Kate allowed him to position her so she could see the people behind them on the sidewalk. Her eyes hopscotched across each of them quickly and, she hoped, covertly. She understood the concept that if someone was following them, they would be spooked if they noticed their target noticing them.

But, then again, Kate didn't think she was being followed at

all.

“The couple in the green and black jackets,” he added when she was coming up empty. She turned to look for the couple in question. A dark-haired man and a dark blond-haired woman, arm in arm. Kate let out a loud sigh and turned back to Jonathan.

“You mean Mr. And Mrs. All Over Each Other?” She snorted. “I don’t think their interest lies anywhere other than with each other.”

“They were in the restaurant and left when we did, even though their food wasn’t finished.”

Although Jonathan’s eyes were on hers, she could tell his attention was still tracking the upcoming couple. His intensity was almost surprising and, perhaps, the reason why she did what she did next.

“You know, you’re right,” she said, looking back at the couple that was nearly upon them. “They might be following us.” She grabbed Jonathan’s hand, abruptly breaking his focus, and smiled. “So, why don’t we lose them?” Without another word from her bodyguard, Kate began moving. “Let’s take a detour.”

Chapter Five

The scientist pulled Jonathan to the nearest crosswalk and together they surged across the road in a cloud of pedestrians. Kathryn’s grip was firm while the rest of her body seemed surprisingly loose. When she looked back at him, she even had a smile across her lips. One that, again, looked odd there, but also right.

As they hit the sidewalk she kept straight, angling them down a block with a chain clothing store and a twenty-four-hour bakery. Jonathan had studied the layout of the surrounding blocks from their hotel on the plane. It would be hard to get lost unless you intended to do just that. He was comfortable with their small detour. However, his attention was still sharp, frequently looking back over his shoulder at where the couple had been.

They stayed across the road, passing over their own crosswalk to get to the next stretch of sidewalk. Maybe he had been overreacting. The man in the green jacket turned his head and met Jonathan's stare.

Maybe not.

"Mr. Bodyguard?" Kathryn said. Jonathan didn't turn until the man dropped his gaze, laughing at whatever the woman beside him had said. "Staring isn't polite."

Jonathan refocused his attention on Kate. She had slowed her clip but kept holding his hand, steering him through foot traffic. Jonathan felt her warm skin against his. It was soft in his rugged hands, which were hardened by his time with the punching bag and weights. He briefly wondered what she thought of his rough skin before quickly killing the thought. While he knew the woman wasn't thinking about the intimacy that came with holding hands, he found his focus was starting to break because of it. Instead of shaking the hand free, however, he cleared his throat and used his training to get back to what was important.

His job.

“Let’s hang a right up here. If we cross the road we’ll hit construction,” he said.

Kathryn snorted.

“If we’re being followed, we won’t lose our tail that easily,” she said back, dropping her voice as if the two were conspiring. “Don’t tell me I’ve been assigned a lazy bodyguard.”

She looked ahead with a smirk trailing her lips. She was being difficult and she knew it, teasing him while simultaneously goading him. Jonathan didn’t know if he thought the attempt was amusing, considering her earlier mood covered in frost, or annoying. Either way, he wasn’t about to be labeled as lazy on his last field assignment. Even if it was by a woman he was starting to guess would never be happy with his job performance.

“You’re absolutely right,” he said with enthusiasm. “I really need to step up my game.”

Kathryn started to loosen her grip, probably feeling her sarcasm backfiring, but Jonathan held it firm. Instead of trailing behind her, he took two long strides ahead.

Now he was leading her.

Looking both ways, Jonathan tugged her across the street to the left, in between a lag in traffic. Had they both not run, they might not have made it. Despite Kate’s gasp of concern, Jonathan continued parallel to the block they’d just left before coming to the intersection. He blew through it within another pocket of pedestrians until they were at the opening of a preppy

clothing store. He didn't waste any time and ducked through its double doors, passing through an invisible cloud of loud cologne and expensively dressed mannequins. One thin, very tan sales associate was on them within seconds.

"Can I help you two find anything?" the young woman said, eyes dropping to their clasped hands. She raised her expertly styled eyebrow as Jonathan kept moving.

"We're just browsing."

The associate backed off, but not without a huff.

Jonathan scanned the tops of clothing racks and display tables for an exit. While he was familiar with the shops and buildings around their hotel, he didn't know their layouts once inside. This particular store was the first of several housed in a much larger mall. Another set of double doors could be seen in the back corner, leading to what looked to be a common area between the other stores.

Jonathan slowed, hesitating in his next decision. Playing into Kathryn's teasing was fun, but pulling her into a busy area just to show he wasn't a wet blanket? That was starting to toe the line that separated fun and responsibility.

However, Kathryn didn't seem to care or to be currently struggling with his internal dilemma. She took advantage of his pause to untangle her hand from his.

"Come on, Mr. Bodyguard, let's see if you can multitask."

Then she darted toward the back corner of the store and was at the common area doors before he'd even had time to process

how the absence of her hand left his cold.

* * *

KATE WASN'T SURE what had come over her. Maybe it was belated excitement at being so close to the convention, a giant step toward realizing a goal she'd striven toward for as long as she could remember. Or maybe it was years of being cooped up in a lab finally catching up to her that had created the sudden desire to be playful. Or maybe it was the handsome, dark-haired man who had a backstory that tugged at her heartstrings, taking him from a man who was annoying to surprisingly human. Like his picture, the man definitely wasn't of the stock variety.

Kate pushed into the common area of the minmall with a grin from ear to ear. Whatever had made this mood crop up, she was still enjoying it.

"Kathryn," Jonathan called from behind. She cast him a quick glance, noting he wasn't sharing in her mirth, but kept going.

The common area had a good number of people bustling down the hall before turning into different chain stores. Kate passed a shoe store and an electronics boutique before hitting a pocket of air that smelled so delicious it grabbed her full attention. She whipped her head upward to look at the second story. Her full stomach batted the thoughts of cookies out of her head, but the escalator leading up to them made her turn on the spot. She gave her bodyguard another grin that she felt in her bones was as mischievous as she could muster and didn't stop as she walked up the escalator.

“Kathryn,” he said again, warning her. But, really, what was he going to do? He wasn’t her father. He wasn’t her boss. He wasn’t her funder.

He definitely wasn’t her husband or boyfriend.

With another weird thrill of amusement, she let out a giggle that carried her along to the second story. Heavy footfalls sounded against the metal behind her as she hit the tile. Jonathan was now quickening his pace. So, what was a girl to do?

Kate matched and then added some speed of her own. Walking fast turned into sprinting, weaving through the shoppers with nothing more than a few nasty faces and words thrown her way. She didn’t care. Now she had a mission. She was going to lose her bodyguard to prove to him that, even if his intentions were good, they weren’t needed.

She could lose her imaginary tail.

She could outsmart a man trained in surveillance.

She could take care of herself.

The humor she’d been feeling hardened into determination.

Kate spotted an opportunity to slip out of Jonathan’s view when a group of laughing teen girls exited a coffee shop. She cut to the right of them and immediately ducked behind their group, moving toward the second escalator that led to the first floor. When she righted herself, already descending downward, she looked over her shoulder at the bodyguard.

It worked!

Jonathan kept going straight, slowing but not stopping as he

tried to get his eyes on her. The flush of success at evading her guard narrowed her focus as she hurried down the last of the escalator. Sure, she'd just proven she could get away, but how far could she go?

Instead of hurrying to the first-floor main entrance that deposited shoppers back to the sidewalk, Kate saw a second opportunity she couldn't pass up. Past the public bathrooms at the end of a short hall at the corner of the building were two large metal doors that must have been primarily used for bringing in merchandise. A rubber doorstep kept the door ajar. Beyond that she could see a strip of daylight. Kate booked it as fast as she could without her shoes slapping the tile too loudly, straight to and through the door.

It was the end of the mall, the building and the one next to it separated by the small walkway that ran the width of both. A set of industrial Dumpsters and their stench filled the small space, making her escape less ideal than she'd hoped it would be. But, then again, Kate didn't much care.

She'd just outsmarted her bodyguard and his tailored knowledge of keeping tabs on people.

Kate finally slowed and walked at a leisurely pace down the small alley and back to the sidewalk that ran in front of the mall's entrance. She half expected to see Jonathan blocking her path, huffing and ready to call her father, but as she scanned the faces she didn't find his.

Kate froze.

Her muscles seized, her breath held.

While she'd expected to see the bodyguard, she hadn't expected to see another face she recognized. In fact, two faces she recognized.

The couple that had originally spooked Jonathan, starting Kate's fun little exercise, were not only walking out of the mall, but doing so quickly. Like they too were in a hurry. This need seemed to intensify as the man looked to the left and the woman looked to the right, also seemingly scanning faces in the crowd.

And then the woman stopped when she locked on to a familiar face.

Hers.

Suddenly Kate cursed her game of cat and mouse with the bodyguard. The woman turned back to the man, but Kate didn't wait to see what happened next. She backtracked in record time to the alley and hurried down its length as the sound of pounding drew nearer.

Was the couple really running after her?

Why?

Was she just overreacting?

Or had Jonathan been right about the couple all along?

Kate reached the metal door that led back into the mall and started to second-guess herself. It was a coincidence. That was all. It was perfectly normal for a couple to eat and then go shopping. It was New York City, after all. She nodded to herself, trying to ignore the fear that had cropped up. She took a step

back and looked toward the mouth of the alley.

Seconds later the woman and her green jacket came into view. Kate's blood ran cold but her feet stayed warm. She grabbed the door handle, ready to fling it open and make a mad dash inside, when it swung wide so fast that she gave a little scream.

"Whoa, it's me," said Jonathan. He grabbed her shoulders, steadying her. Relief didn't just pool within her, it flooded. "What's wrong?"

Kate turned back to the mouth of the alley. The woman and her counterpart were nowhere to be seen.

"She was just there," Kate whispered.

"Who?" Jonathan's grip tightened. He moved her around behind him, looking where she had.

Maybe Kate had imagined it.

"Who?" he asked again. "Kathryn?"

"Call me Kate," she whispered. She shook her head and looked up at him. Embarrassment at acting like such a carefree child washed over her. While trying to avoid the bodyguard and what she believed to be a service she didn't need, she'd just managed to convince herself that she was in some kind of danger. She was creating fictional scenarios and problems for herself, most likely seeing more in the couple's actions than was there. Still, the fear wasn't fully leaving, either. Fear often led to loss of control.

And Kate didn't like losing what little control she had.

She cleared her throat before continuing with a much stronger

voice. “I never liked being called Kathryn.”

“Okay, Kate,” he started, brows pulling together. “Who did you see?”

“Never mind,” she said. She straightened her back and took a deep breath. There was no way she was going to let the bodyguard’s paranoia and her fear make her lose her focus. “Let’s head back,” she said, no longer wanting to explore.

Kate might be able to write off how the woman in the green coat had seemingly been looking for her as a coincidence, but she wasn’t about to take off from the bodyguard’s side again.

She was in denial, but not that much.

* * *

THE WALK BACK to the hotel was quiet. More than anything Jonathan wanted to reprimand his charge for running off, but after seeing her expression in the alley, he’d refrained. Whatever—whoever—she’d seen had spooked her. While seeing Jonathan had done the opposite.

She’d let out a deep sigh that had seemingly passed through her entire body at the sight of him. Seeing such poignant relief because of his proximity had affected him almost as much as the look of fear she’d harbored seconds before. The absurd amount of annoyance he’d felt for Kathryn—Kate—had taken a backseat to a resounding protectiveness that went beyond his usual job duties.

He suddenly not only needed to keep her safe, he wanted to do it, and to the best of his abilities.

The silence stretched past the sidewalk and up to their rooms, and when it finally broke, it wasn't by much.

"I'm a little tired from traveling," Kate muttered. "I'll let you know if I want to leave." There was an undercurrent to her words, but Jonathan couldn't place the emotion creating it. Was it guilt at ditching him earlier? Or residual fear from whatever had happened when he hadn't been right on her heels?

"Thank you," was all he could say.

She nodded and opened her door. He waited until it was closed and the top latch was thrown in place. It made him wonder if she'd done it by habit, or if Kate was more worried than she was letting on.

Chapter Six

Kate closed the top latch over the door and took a step back to look at it. She heard Jonathan's door close.

You aren't in any danger, she thought. Don't let his overprotectiveness worry you.

But even as she gave herself the advice, she couldn't help but feel an influx of nerves tighten her stomach.

"This is why I didn't want a bodyguard," she muttered, rubbing her stomach. "Now I think I have problems I don't really have."

Trying to forget about the man next door wasn't as easy as she'd hoped.

Talking about his past, including Orion's origin, had softened her otherwise harsh opinion of the man. He wasn't some faceless hunk of meat sent to stalk her in hopes of keeping a potentially

imaginary predator at bay. He was a man who had persevered through tragedy and had made a life of preventing it from repeating again.

And wasn't that exactly what she was doing, too?

She tried to banish thoughts of the brooding dark-haired man and fell onto the bed. The jaunt right after eating a full meal plus traveling combined to make her eyelids unbelievably heavy as soon as she hit the pillow.

The feeling of exhaustion and the desire to give in to the comfort of the bed surprised her. Taking naps wasn't something she was used to doing. In the last few years, if there was time to sleep, then that meant there was time to work. She'd rarely picked a nap over lab time. It was a choice that had turned into a habit.

A yawn tore itself from her lips and she knew it wouldn't be long before she was asleep.

This trip was already turning out much differently than she had originally planned.

* * *

THE ROOM WAS DARK.

Barely any light filtered in from behind the curtains. It was so dim Kate placed them as streetlights. Which meant her nap had stretched longer than she'd meant it to.

She rolled onto her back and yawned. Even though she'd been sleeping, she felt exhaustion still weighing her down. If she closed her eyes again, she was sure she'd sleep until morning.

So what had woken her up?

She tilted her head, listening.

A car horn blared outside, promptly followed by two more.

Ah, the sweet sounds of New York City, she thought.

She contemplated her next move, listening to a symphony of agitated drivers vent via their respective vehicles when another sound caught her ear.

Confused, she turned her head, peering into the dark for the culprit. It stopped.

Kate's heartbeat began to pick up. She waited. There it was again.

Someone was in the hallway.

But what were they doing?

Curious—always curious—Kate got off the bed and made her way to the door. She peered through the peephole but was met with a cloudy circle with no help identifying who was outside. If there was anyone at all. She dropped back down to flat-footed and bit her bottom lip, waiting.

Seconds turned into minutes. Kate remained perfectly still until she was positive the sound, whatever it had been, had stopped. Slowly she unlatched the top lock and eased the door open a crack.

No one was there.

Cautious, Kate stepped out into the hallway. It was empty. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

See? That bodyguard has made you paranoid, she thought. No one is after you. No one even knows where you—

Her current thought bubble popped as she turned.

Taped to the door was a piece of paper with a single word written on it: Stop.

However, it wasn't the message that made her throat catch.

Soaking the paper, blurring the one bold word, was blood. It ran off the paper and down the chipped paint of the door.

And this time, Kate didn't think it was fake.

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