



MARY  
SUZANNE

# GUARDIAN ANGEL

# Guardian Angel

## By

## Mary Suzanne

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# Chapter One

Tori glanced at the piece of paper lying on the desktop and quickly lowered her head to read its contents. Her eyes widened over the grisly news she'd have to report tonight. Two homicides and another mugging had taken place on New York City's busy streets. When she stepped in front of the camera she would have no choice but to report these horrible crimes. She loved her work as an anchor at the news network, but she had never gotten used to reporting the gory details of the violence affecting so many innocents. It was even harder for her when there was a young person involved. Especially, someone who didn't have street smarts.

Somehow, she had always managed to hide the distaste she felt for these stories from her supervisor, Mack McPherson. She knew in her heart he wouldn't have the patience to continue to carry a squeamish reporter on his staff.

"Hold still a minute, Tori," her makeup artist, Joan Becket, chastised, interrupting Tori's private thoughts. She applied a dusting of powder to Tori's nose. "You've only got five minutes before air time, and you want to look good tonight."

Her gaze met Joan's twinkling brown eyes. "You always manage to work wonders on me." They lapsed into silence as she set about putting the final changes to Tori's lips with a red glossy color.

"That's because I have the perfect subject to work on." She nodded, apparently satisfied. "Take a look at the finished product."

Tori lifted her lashes and gazed at her reflection in the mirror. Jade green eyes, shrouded by thick black lashes, jumped out at her. The new spiral perm looked good on her deep auburn hair. Its riotous waves reached just below her shoulders. She lifted her gaze and met Joan's in the mirror. She grinned. Two dimples sliced across her cheeks.

"You always manage to give my confidence a lift when I need it," Tori told her, letting her voice trail off. She needed the lift after reading tonight's upcoming news stories. She just couldn't shake the morbid sensation settling over her. "Thanks for your help, Joan."

"Don't mention it," she answered, brushing away the compliment. "You'd better get a move on if you want to make it on time."

Tori stood, picked up her handbag and the news reports then made her way out of the small cubicle. She walked down the narrow hallway, heading toward the lights and cameras set up for the broadcast.

"Tori! Tori, wait."

When she turned, she saw Mack, his hands waving madly in the air, so she waited for him to join her. She noticed his gaze didn't quite meet hers as he approached with hurried steps. His wrinkled face held a worried expression.

He reached up and brushed his hand through the silvery hair that fell across his lined forehead.

“What’s up, Mack?” She asked as she glanced at the paper and envelope he was clutching tightly in his hand.

“This came in the mail today.” He handed her the letter with a grimace lining his face.

Tori glanced down at the familiar looking stationary she’d come to dread seeing. Swallowing hard, she lowered her eyes to keep Mack from seeing her reaction. Unfolding it, Tori skimmed the contents. Her heart raced. The threatening words leapt out at her. This was the third letter she’d received in less than a month. She wasn’t certain whether this person was trying to make a joke or if it was someone deranged who really wanted to harm her.

After reading the menacing words again, she glanced at Mack. She made an effort to present a calm look hoping this would cause him fewer worries over her safety. Inside, she couldn’t stop mentally screaming in fear

“I’ve decided to hire a bodyguard for you,” he informed her, removing the letter from her trembling fingers. “When this one came today, I called the police and reported it.”

“Oh, come on, Mack, you aren’t taking this seriously, are you?” Tori tried making light of the situation, but her voice wavered slightly. When she’d received the first letter, she didn’t think too much about it. When the second one arrived, she began to feel more than a little uneasy. New York was a big city that could hold any number of nuts out there—criminals who were more than ready to victimize others.

“I take this very seriously,” he said gruffly, folding the offensive letter and tucking it in his shirt pocket.

“Hiring a bodyguard is a little much, don’t you think?” She again tried hiding her unrest behind a smile. “It sounds more like you’re appointing me a guardian angel.”

“I don’t believe I’m going to extremes.” He gave her a narrow look. “If you want to call him a guardian angel, well that’s a fair description. He’ll watch over you to make sure you’re safe.”

Knowing she wouldn’t be able to talk him out of the bodyguard, she decided to satisfy her curiosity. Who was the paragon he’d decided would be good enough to protect her? He’d have to have damn good credentials because Mack considered himself her surrogate father. “And who have you chosen?” Warmth filled her over Mack thinking of her welfare.

“His name is Casey O’Rourke,” he answered. “I can assure you that he knows his business. He’s going to stop by the station as soon as the newscast is over and he’ll be taking you home tonight.”

She glanced at his set features and knew there wasn’t any point in arguing with him. He’d already made up his mind. From the corner of her eye, she watched Scot Carter make his way over to where they stood.

Scot was an aging broadcaster who had been the number one anchor on the nightly news for many years. After Tori came to work for the station, it didn't take the top brass long to replace Scot and give her his position. Now, he was Mack's assistant.

Tori often felt as if Scot resented her for taking his job. His sometime sullen actions toward her only strengthened that impression. "I have to go or I'll miss my cue," she murmured, touching Mack's hand before she turned, making her way toward the brightly lit newsroom.

She didn't feel up to trying to make small talk with Scot. There was always this invisible wall between them. She lifted her hand and waved to Scot as she passed him in the hallway.

When she slipped onto her anchor chair, she quickly adjusted her ear mike and straightened the papers someone had placed on the desk. Her co-anchor, Dominic Charles, already occupied the chair next to hers.

"I thought I was going to have to anchor alone tonight," he said, his tone light. "What were you and Mack talking about?"

His dark eyes watched her closely. She could see the curiosity eating away at him. Well, he'd certainly come straight to the point, even though he tried playing down his words. He obviously wanted her to believe he was just making conversation. "It wasn't anything of importance," she murmured. She decided not to reveal what they'd discussed.

Dominic was an ambitious competitor—always wanting to make sure, she didn't top him when it came to a news item. There were times she felt he overreacted when Mack assigned her as a sole reporter to a story. She'd eventually put his attitude down to his desire to climb the ladder and succeed in the television industry.

The red light flashed as the cameraman gave her the signal to begin the newscast. She let her problems slip to the back of her mind as she glanced through the news reports printed on the papers lying before her.

Tori raised her head and looked straight at the camera. She began her segment of the nightly news and finished on cue, just as the cameraman signaled that it was time for a commercial.

"It looks as if you've gotten the meatiest stories again," Dominic complained with a smile, trying to act as if he was joking.

Tori caught the brittle sound in his voice. "What do you mean?" Her gaze drifted across the short space to where he sat.

"I'm beginning to believe that Mack gives you the better stories because of your dad," he criticized. He shuffled the papers unnecessarily in front of him.

She glanced at him again and saw the anger he was trying to hold in check. "You're not being fair and you know it," she retorted, stung by his accusation.

"You're on, Dominic," the cameraman said, interrupting their heated debate.

Tori breathed a sigh of relief, grateful for the interruption. She listened to Dominic giving his news segment. When he'd first come to the station to work, they had a more lighthearted relationship with the usual joking and bantering.

Now, strain existed between them, making their work environment tense. She found she didn't enjoy her job as much these last few months that Dominic anchored with her.

She'd graduated from college at twenty-one, and started at the station right away. Three years passed swiftly. This was all she'd ever wanted to do with her life, patterning it after her father's life style. Throughout the years she thought there wasn't anything else in the world she'd rather do than have a career in news casting.

Dominic was a different story. He'd come to work at the station six months ago, with no pull from anyone to help his career. He'd told her how he struggled through college, using government loans to subsidize him and pay his way.

Deep down, she felt he was critical of her for the way her father cleared a path for her in the industry. She couldn't help how the developments in her life had bolstered her career. She hadn't meant to step on either Scot's or Dominic's chances, but it looked that way to both men.

She didn't think she could ever be really close to Dominic in the way friends should be. Lately, he acted almost ruthless in his goal to achieve fame, and he made sure he let her know he didn't want anyone standing in his way. From listening to him today and in the past few weeks, she figured she was just another steppingstone to him.

Tori delivered the final story and sat waiting for the red light to go off on the camera signaling the news broadcast was over. The overhead lights began to dim and she started gathering her papers. As she rose, she glanced across the room and noticed Dominic was already walking toward the exit. He certainly was in a big hurry tonight, not bothering to tell anyone goodbye. She supposed he still felt angry over their heated words earlier.

Tori shook her head, dismissing Dominic from her thoughts. She made her way across the room. From out the shadows a man stepped in front of her, blocking her path. She lifted her eyes and quickly studied his dark features.

A moment of panic swept through her. Who was he and where did he come from? She didn't remember seeing him in the studio before she started the newscast. Could he be her stalker—the one writing the threatening letters to her? Her legs wobbled. Her palms felt sweaty and her heart raced in fear.

As soon as the thought came to her, her mind cleared and her panic receded. Nothing could harm her here, especially with so many people within shouting distance.

She continued to study him. He looked like someone who was health conscious and worked out frequently in a gym. He stood more than six-feet, making her five-feet-four inches puny in comparison. His muscled shoulders and arms stretched the seams of the black sweater. She was quick to note how his wide shoulders narrowed down to a slim waist and muscled thighs and hips.

When Tori glanced again at his bronzed face, she felt overwhelmed. The deepest blue eyes she'd ever seen, stared back at her. His jet-black hair was long, trailing over the collar of his sweater, and his nose looked as if it had been broken at least once. A small white scar ran the length of his neck, reaching up to just behind his ear.

The man looked dangerous, hard, as though he could handle anything thrown at him. Overall, it made for one very attractive package. His very size made her feel vulnerable. Excitement filled her body. She didn't feel comfortable with either emotion.

"Excuse me," she managed to say through trembling lips. She shifted to the side to try to move past him.

"Ms. Conners, I'm Casey O'Rourke," he introduced himself, pushing out his hand toward her.

Never in her wildest dreams would Tori have ever pictured that her bodyguard would be so drop-dead gorgeous. Somehow she'd thought he would look like the average guy. An average guy would be wearing a conservative suit and conforming to social standards, not this hunk of a man staring at her with a measuring look of his own.

As soon as he introduced himself, her legs began to shake. Her entire body trembled. Never before had she had such an intense reaction to an introduction. This was a new experience for her and she found she wasn't immune to the sensations racing through her.

"So, you're the guardian angel Mack hired to watch over me," she blurted out, feeling so nervous that the words had popped out without her thinking how they may sound to him.

"If that's what you want to call me," he said as he gave her a mocking grin. His gaze made a slow descent over her body. "I've had people call me worse in my life." His gaze eventually returned to her face, but not before roaming over every inch of her again.

She couldn't move a muscle, paralyzed as she listened to the husky timbre of his voice. It had such a deep, rich quality that chills raced along her spine.

She shook her head slightly to clear it and looked up at him again. She shivered, goose bumps rising on her skin as she felt like the man undressed her with a look. She knew she was being foolish, but she couldn't help it. Her reaction to this man, this stranger, was totally out of control.

"We can leave anytime," he told her, moving slightly out of her way. "Mack tells me you do the early and late broadcast."

At his sudden change of subject, the tension began to ease out of her. "Yes, when I'm not out on a story." He fell into step alongside her when she started toward the exit.

"Tonight, I'll follow you home in my car," he explained, his sharp blue eyes gazing across at her before sweeping the parking area a second time. "Tomorrow evening, I'll take you to work and drive you home. Where do you live?"

"I have an apartment about ten minutes from the studio," she said, reaching in her handbag for her car keys.

"I'll be right behind you," he promised her, waiting until she got behind the wheel, closed and locked the door before he walked off.

She glanced in her rear view mirror as she inserted her key in the ignition. Then quickly, he'd disappeared from view. As soon as she pulled from the parking lot a pair of headlights appeared right behind her.

She didn't know what to make of Mr. O'Rourke. Mack hadn't told her where he came from or where he worked. Something about the man both excited and frightened her. He wasn't like the typical males she met on a daily basis. This man was a breed above the others.

She thought it was foolish for Mack to go to such lengths for her, but she felt sure her father would have approved. Sadness swept through her as it always did when her thoughts drifted to her father.

A tragic accident had taken his life about a year ago while he was covering a story for Mack. From that moment on, Mack had taken on the role of a father to her. He always gave her the impression that he felt responsible in some way for her loss.

Tori had never known her mother. She died while giving birth to her, leaving her father to raise her alone. With the closeness they'd shared, this made it doubly hard for her to lose him so suddenly. After his death, she'd immersed herself in work, swallowing her grief so she could get on with her life one day at a time.

She saw her exit and turned on the ramp. She glanced again in the mirror. She wanted to make sure Casey's car still followed hers. Only a few feet separated them. She sighed. At least she hadn't lost him during the drive.

After pulling into her apartment complex, she turned onto an empty parking spot and cut the ignition. She got out of the car. Glancing over, she saw that her bodyguard was already heading her way.

"What time are you leaving for work tomorrow evening?" He asked, his voice gruff.

"I have to be there by five-thirty." She decided to ignore his rude attitude as she headed toward her building's entrance. She turned to him once they reached the elevator inside the apartment building lobby. "I can manage from here." She knew her words sounded like a dismissal, but he didn't act as if they bothered him.



"Mack said to make sure you were safely in your apartment before I left," he said, boarding the elevator with her. "Before I forget, he also suggested that you not mention that I'm your bodyguard to any of your friends, or anyone at the studio. Here's my card with my number." He handed her a small white business card. "If you need me, this is my answering service and they'll find me."

"Why is Mack being so secretive?"

"You can never be too safe," he answered, as he followed her to her apartment. She unlocked her door and pushed it open before facing him again. "There's something else that we haven't covered yet. Do you have any romantic interests I should know about?"

Her mouth dropped open. Did she hear what she thought she did? Why should he have to know about her private life? When she regained her composure, Tori glanced at him with a half-lidded look. "Not at the moment," she answered coolly, refusing to tell him that her relationship with Josh Kennedy had ended only a few months before. "I don't see how that concerns you though."

"Believe me, it's only a business question. I ask it of all my clients," he told her, studying her features for several seconds with a measuring look.

She felt deflated. Why though? He was a stranger, her bodyguard. She shouldn't have any feelings for him one way or another.

"Good. That will make this simpler then. As far as everyone is concerned, I'm your lover," he informed her lightly. "When I bring you to work, make sure everyone sees that we're more than good friends."

She knew exactly what he was suggesting. A kiss or a hug would give everyone the general idea that she and Casey were an item. His suggestion didn't sound too distasteful to her, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of agreeing with him right off.

"I don't believe that's necessary," she replied quickly, starting to turn away from him.

He grabbed her arm, stopping her from walking away. "It's very necessary, if we want to catch whoever is sending you the letters. And from now on, call me Casey," he added before turning away. "Goodnight, Tori," he called over his shoulder. Without looking back, he headed toward the elevator.

She made her way inside her apartment and closed her door. As soon as she locked herself in, she pressed her back against her door with a sigh. The man rubbed her the wrong way and she didn't even know why. She didn't know why she found his dark looks so disturbing either. Tori could still feel the butterflies racing through her. She headed straight for her bedroom and began removing her clothing. She desperately needed a shower.

She stood beneath the warm spray, letting the water pound on her. As soon as she closed her eyes, thoughts of Casey filled her mind. Did he do this type of work all the time, or was it a special favor to Mack? She had to admit he looked right for the part of a bodyguard. She wasn't certain whether it was his rough good looks or his mocking attitude.

She'd have to get used to showing him affection. Oh God, she'd have to kiss him, touch him. Her body shuddered. How would those full lips of his feel covering hers? Just thinking about it bothered her on a visceral level. She had to get him out of her thoughts. Hell, she didn't even know if he was married. She didn't notice a ring, but that didn't mean anything. Many men chose to keep the fact they had wives a secret. Personally, men like that disgusted her.

Once she finished washing, she stepped from the shower and quickly dressed. Maybe if she watched some television she'd be able to think about something other than her bodyguard. Unfortunately, she couldn't concentrate on the movie unfolding before her. His face kept flashing in front of her. Disgusted, she switched off the set and made her way to bed.

Tori stared at the ceiling for a long time. Her thoughts circled around and around as she mulled over everything happening in her life. She couldn't think of anyone who hated her enough to send threatening letters to her. It was more than likely some disgruntled fan. She shook her head. That had to be it because she couldn't think of anyone she didn't get along with.

Her thoughts turned to Josh. At least she was confident he couldn't be responsible for sending the letters. After all, he'd been the one to end their relationship. They'd had nothing in common and she didn't realize it until after he'd walked out of her life. It had taken her a few months to get over him, but she had.

Mack's idea was probably a good one. Perhaps she shouldn't be trying to second-guess him. He'd always been right in the past when she'd come to him with her problems. She trusted his judgment.

Besides, even though her emotions were all over the place since meeting her bodyguard, she had to admit, she did feel safer when he was around. His strength and no-nonsense way of stating things brought a sense of security to her that she hadn't felt since her father's death.

She plumped up her pillows and let her thoughts drift away. She wouldn't solve anything by going over them repeatedly in her mind. She now had a guardian angel to watch over her, without the usual set of wings. She smiled. Casey's face once again filled her mind's eyes as she drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Two

The ringing of the telephone woke Tori and she glanced at the clock on the nightstand. She'd stayed up late last night and figured she could sleep in past noon and still be to work on time. Her co-workers knew her routine, so she figured it couldn't be any of them calling.

Instead of picking up the phone, she let the answering machine take the message while she got out of bed and pulled on her robe. There was silence for several seconds, but then a male voice came over the wire. She frowned trying to identify the voice of the caller.

"You'll never live to see twenty-five, Tori Connors!" The sinister tone sent a chill racing down her back. "You need to get out of the broadcasting business. All you report is trash. I'm giving you fair warning that I'm watching your every move."

When the machine popped off, Tori sat heavily on the side of her bed, her legs no longer supporting her. Panic raced through her body as a helpless sensation overwhelmed her.

She didn't want to, but she turned on the machine and listened again to the voice. Terror clutched her heart, but she needed to see if she recognized the person. Something familiar about the voice registered with her although she couldn't place it to anyone. An occasional bell rang in the background, but again, she couldn't identify it.

This was the first time she'd ever received a threatening call on her recorder. She put a trembling hand to her breast. The caller knew where she lived!

Her thoughts were jumbled, chaotic, jumping from one thing to another. How did the caller know her unlisted phone number? She slowly shook her head trying to bring some reason to the fast developing events. The only person she'd given her number to was Mack.

Since the letters started arriving, she could put them away and try to forget they even existed. Now hearing the stranger's voice made it all too real.

She lay back down and pulled the covers up to her chin. She trembled in fright remembering the sinister words coming from the answering machine.

The sensation of helplessness raced through her again as she thought of all the stories she'd reported about homicides, never thinking that the web of events she told to the public might catch her someday. She felt nauseated over the thought that a sick person stalked her and wished her dead.

While she huddled beneath the cover, the phone rang again. Her heart pounded so fast she thought it might jump out of her chest. She waited tensely to hear who was calling.

When the voice came across the line, she didn't recognize it, but she knew it wasn't a threatening call. The caller eventually identified himself as Casey O'Rourke and she jumped out of bed to pick up the receiver.

"Tori Connors here," she answered breathlessly.

"I didn't think you were at home," he greeted, the rough timbre of his voice working as a calming effect on her senses. "I wanted to let you know I'm coming by earlier today than we originally planned."

"Oh," she murmured, pushing the threatening phone call to the back of her mind. His strong voice brought a short respite to her and she could think more clearly now.

"I'll explain when I get there. Be ready to leave at three."

He hung up before she could say anything. She had eventually decided to mention the call, but he hadn't given her the chance. No matter, she'd have the tape ready to play for him when he arrived.

While she drank a cup of coffee, she picked up the paper to read, paying special attention to the violent crimes covering the front page. Before they were only distasteful for her to broadcast—now she felt they were a part of her life. Laying the paper aside, she glanced at the clock. It was already two o'clock and he had promised to arrive at her apartment by three. She walked into her bedroom and gathered the clothing she planned to wear to the studio.

While dressing, she blocked all the unpleasant thoughts from her mind. As she walked into the living room, she glanced at the clock and noticed it was almost three. Within a few minutes, the doorbell chimed. She hurried through the hallway and stood on her toes, peering through the peephole. She caught the image of Casey, his hands held loosely at his sides, his gaze scanning the hallway.

Relief swept through her as she pulled the door open. "Good afternoon," she greeted him. Just seeing her bodyguard brought her rocky world into focus and her fright slowly began to lessen. His strength reached out to her. Her gaze drifted over him and again, she felt struck by his masculinity. He wore tight fitting gray slacks with a matching colored sweater. His black hair looked damp, as if he'd just gotten out of the shower, and he carried a black sport coat over his arm.

"Good afternoon," he answered her greeting as his gaze moved around the interior of her apartment. He walked past her to the window facing the street. When he turned, his brow creased with a frown. "Do you normally keep your drapes open?"

"Most of the time."

"I'd suggest you keep them closed in the evening" He moved toward the hallway that led into the kitchen and bedroom.

She followed slowly behind, frowning in confusion. What was he looking for? She managed to catch up to him near her bedroom door. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"I'm checking the layout of your apartment," he explained as he walked through her kitchen. "I wasn't sure how many windows faced the street or alleyway below."

"There aren't any windows in my bedroom." Her words stopped him before he could enter.

He nodded and walked past her into the living room again. When he stopped near the couch, his gaze drifted to her. He had given her a passing glance when he'd first entered, but this time, he took his time with a more thorough look.

She didn't miss the spark of interest in his eyes.

When he looked at her face again, he studied her features with the same intensity. "You're more beautiful in person than you are on television. I didn't take the time to notice last night."

"I suppose that's a compliment." She felt her spirits lift with his words. She couldn't come up with a reason why she should feel so euphoric.

"If that's what you want to make of it, it's all right by me." He shrugged his broad shoulders carelessly.

Tori felt her shoulders slump, deflated. Last night he caused the same reaction in her when he'd told her it was only a business arrangement. He wasn't giving her confidence a lift by his words. Resentment filled her. She didn't get the chance to mention the telephone call.

He walked over and flipped on her answering machine. The voice from the recorder echoed into the room. He whirled around, pinning her with a grim stare, his lips thinning in displeasure. His face held a stony look of disapproval. He quickly covered the distance separating them in long strides and gripped her shoulders. "Why didn't you tell me someone had called you this morning? Were you waiting for the next call to come in before you mentioned it?"

"You didn't give me a chance to tell you about the call." She didn't mention the fact that she'd just as soon forget the call. Pushing it to the back of her mind was simpler than dealing with it. "I'm hardly a child since I'm twenty-four. The first thing you wanted to do when you came in was check out the apartment. You're the one acting childish." She didn't know why she was arguing with him.

"From now on, you're to make sure I know about every message, including telephone calls," he grated in a low tone, eventually releasing her shoulders. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," she answered coolly, stung by his words and actions.

"I'm going to have a trap put on your phone this afternoon so if the caller persists, the telephone company can trace his call." He walked over to the window again, looking down at the street below. He stood for several minutes with his back turned, intent on his study. Eventually, his gaze lifted as he looked across the street. "Are those apartments over there?"

"Yes."

"That's the reason I suggested you keep your drapes closed in the evening. You can never tell who lives across from you." He made his way across the room, stopping within inches of where she stood.

"You're going to have lunch with me so we can be seen in public together. If he's watching, he'll notice you're not alone."

After the letters and the phone call, she almost dreaded the thought of leaving her apartment. She knew she couldn't hole up and hide from life forever. Where was her fighting spirit? "I'm ready whenever you are," she said, picking up her coat and handbag on the way to the door.

When they reached the foyer of the building, he took her hand, surprising her. Her sidelong glance met his piercing look. She knew better than to protest. Right now he was still pissed she hadn't mentioned the phone call she'd received this morning. In her heart though, she didn't feel like protesting because no matter how angry he appeared, she felt safe and protected with him by her side.

The doorman nodded to Tori as they passed, grinning when he saw how Casey held her hand tightly. She returned his smile and felt a flush stain her cheeks. It hadn't been that long ago that she'd left her apartment in much the same way with her ex.

Casey released her hand as they reached his car parked near the curb. Once he opened her door, he walked around to the driver's side and got in. Silence reigned in the car as they made their way across town.

Tori began to get uncomfortable, but it didn't look like he wanted to carry on a conversation.

Pulling off on a side street, he turned onto a parking lot and turned off the engine. "We have reservations for three-thirty," he said, glancing at his watch. "It looks as if we've made it." He walked around and opened her door.

Tori again felt her hand engulfed in his. Before entering the foyer, her gaze strayed down the long sidewalk. She shook her head, almost sure that she'd seen Dominic enter another building across the street. That couldn't be right. Her eyes must be playing tricks on her. She turned and followed Casey into the restaurant.

The hostess met them and led the way to a table midway across the room. This was the first time she'd ever been here, but it looked as if everyone knew Casey by name.

A waitress walked over carrying two water glasses. "Hello, Casey, it's been a long time," she crooned in a husky tone, smiling. "Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Things have been hectic lately," he told her, returning her smile.

The friendly exchange annoyed Tori. She couldn't keep the scowl off her face. She thought he was supposed to watch out for her welfare, but here he was, flirting with the young woman instead.

"Excuse me," Tori murmured, interrupting their conversation. "I'll be in the restroom" She stood.

"Hold on a minute," he said, stopping her. "I'm going to the men's room, so I'll walk with you."

Nodding, she kept on walking. She caught his outline falling into step alongside her. When they reached the restroom, they parted company. Tori needed a few minutes alone to regain her composure. She didn't know what was coming over her lately. Maybe it had something to do with the situation. He'd openly flirted with the other woman and it bothered her.

Once inside the room, she gazed in the mirror at her reflection. Anger brought a red flush to her cheeks and a frown marred her brow as she remembered the conversation between Casey and the waitress. She couldn't figure out why she felt this way. When she calmed down, Tori walked out and found Casey waiting for her. He gave her a curious look before accompanying her back to the table.

The waitress returned shortly and took their order. Food was the last thing on her mind, but when the waitress served it, the delicious aroma whet her appetite. She didn't think she could eat after all the emotional turmoil the last few hours, but she finished all the pasta on the plate and sat back satisfied.

"I made the right choice in restaurants," he remarked.

"Yes, I loved it," she admitted, dropping her gaze from his penetrating stare.

"Since we're finished, we'll have time to stop in at the police station and arrange for the tap on your phone." He picked up the bill and removed money from his wallet.

"Why the police station and not the telephone company?"

"We're just cutting corners today. You have to get a police report number to turn into the telephone company before they'll do anything to your phone line."

"Oh." She didn't know the first thing about tracing calls, but it looked like he did. She followed him to the front of the restaurant and took her time putting on her coat so that she could watch the interplay between the waitress and Casey. She didn't miss how he leaned toward the young woman and kissed her cheek softly before joining her near the door. "It's a shame I have to drag you away," she muttered softly.

He gave her a narrow look. "Yes, it is," he said, taking her arm and leading the way to the car.

When she ventured another look at his face, a smug smile lined his features. She scowled, unable to stop herself. Of all the arrogant men she'd ever met in her life, he topped them all. Some instinct told her he knew his masculine vitality and sexiness reached out to women. She had to admit, she wasn't immune to the aura he exuded. He had captured her attention without really putting much effort, into it.

After leaving the police station, he drove to the studio. By the time they reached the parking lot at KLTV, it was nearing five-thirty. Before entering the building, he stopped her. "Remember, I'm your new romantic interest so try to act the part."

Tori braced for what was to come as anticipation filled her. Heat traveled through her body as her gaze slid to his full lips, knowing she would soon know how they felt on hers. For some reason she could hardly wait. A thrill of excitement danced through her. Ever since he'd mentioned their charade to her, she'd thought about how it would feel to have Casey kiss her. Before long, she would know.

Casey held the door for her and Tori entered the long hallway leading into the studio. He reached for her and turned her to face him. He glanced down into her face for several seconds without saying a word.

She felt mesmerized by his gaze and couldn't move a muscle.

"We should practice a little before giving our audience a show," he murmured huskily, drawing her in with his intense gaze.

She waited almost impatiently for the kiss to begin. Slowly, his mouth moved toward hers and she closed her eyes. Holding her breath, Tori felt lightheaded as his tongue invaded her mouth. Her thoughts dimmed as a wave of hazy need blanketed her mind.

Her arms moved of their own free will, circling his neck. Her fingers traveled compulsively, thrusting through the long hair trailing his collar. The kiss escalated into one of hungry passion and desire. This was real for her. There were no thoughts of the others. No thoughts of the charade. No playacting on her part. She could only feel. Emotions raced through her body at an alarming speed. She could feel the intoxicating and sublime sensations passing through her.

His arms drew her even closer, pressing her against his muscled frame, melding them together. He crushed her breast against his wide chest.

She didn't want the kiss to end. She felt such intensity propelling its way through her body that her legs began to shake. Strong arms gripped her tightly so that she didn't fall.

Tori thought she heard the outer door opening behind them, but it seemed only a dream. Right now, only Casey mattered. Only this moment. Ignoring the sound, she kept her eyes tightly closed enjoying the kiss. She didn't want anything to interfere with her moment of bliss.

Her lips moved over his. She felt the need to give him the same pleasure he had shown her. When she heard a loud cough only inches from where they stood, she lifted her head. The pleasure of moments before had been shattered.

## Chapter Three

Tori raised her head and looked at Dominic and Scot. She found it hard to think straight. Casey's kiss still filled her head. Her arms remained draped around Casey's neck. Dominic and Scot stood only a few feet away. Tori didn't miss how their gazes had narrowed watching the intimate kiss.

Eventually, Dominic spoke, "Excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt."

Casey gave the men a quick once over. His gaze looked alert and assessing. Tori did notice he continued to watch Dominic for several seconds.

"You're not interrupting anything," Tori quickly said in an uneven tone, dropping her arms from around Casey's neck. "I'd like you to meet Casey O'Rourke. Casey, this is Dominic Charles, my co-anchor and Mack's assistant, Scot Carter."

A frown settled across Dominic's features when she referred to him as co-anchor. It didn't take him long to wipe the expression away and extend his hand. "It's a pleasure meeting a friend of Tori's," he said, forcing a smile to his lips.



Scot pushed his hand toward Casey, but remained silent.

"Its good meeting you both," Casey answered.

The vibes flowing from Casey reached out to Tori and she glanced quickly at his dark features. Something still bothered him, but she didn't know what.

"I'll leave you two love birds to it," Dominic said, with a nod of his head. "I've got a few things to catch up on before air time. Are you coming, Scot?" He glanced at his companion.

"Yes," he answered, nodding at Casey and Tori as he walked away.

As soon as they were out of hearing, Casey glanced at Tori. "There's something strange about that guy." His gaze followed Dominic and Scot.

"What guy?"

"Your co-anchor."

"He always acts that way. If you were around him long enough, you'd see what I mean." She thought over his description of Dominic and came to her own conclusions. Dominic's main objective in life was reaching the goal of becoming number one anchor on the network. He always tried to top her. She didn't see how this information would interest Casey.

Tori dismissed Dominic from her thoughts as her gaze drifted to Casey's rugged face, remembering their kiss earlier. She shook her head. She had to remember that this was only playacting on his part and she shouldn't try reading any more than that into it. "I'd better hurry if I want to be ready to go on."

"I'll see you after the show." He turned and walked toward Mack's office.

She stood for several seconds longer watching his muscular body as he disappeared through the doorway marked private. The man affected her far too much. She wondered how Casey managed to shake off their kiss so easily. The burning attraction seared through her insides, frightening Tori with its intensity. Never had she felt this way for Josh and she had thought she was in love with him. Tori shook her head again, confused over her wandering thoughts.

She approached the dressing room and greeted Joan as naturally as she could under the circumstances. Her heart had eventually slowed to an even tempo, but just the thought of Casey, had it pounding again for no apparent reason.

"I see you have a new friend," Joan remarked, lifting one eyebrow slightly. "And what a hunk he is. Who is he and where did you meet him?"

Joan must have caught sight of them kissing in the hall. "Casey O'Rourke and yes, he is a hunk."

"If you ever want to get rid of him, I'll be waiting," she said lightly.

Tori could tell she was serious from the look on her face. Casey's tough, mysterious air had women falling at his feet. Tori didn't like this one bit. "Find your own man," she said laughingly, although she meant every word. "There aren't too many like him around. I know because I've been searching everywhere."

"Well, that should do it." She gave Tori's cheek one extra swipe with the powder puff.

"Thanks, I'll see you later." Without a backward glance, she walked into the hallway toward the studio. Her friend's words continued to ring in her ears. She wondered if he had any love interests, but she couldn't come right out and ask him. She joined Dominic in front of the camera.

"Is he a new love?"

"A friend, Dominic," she corrected him, finding his gaze narrowing as he studied her face.

"It looked as if he was more than a friend." He picked up the sheets of papers and glanced through them.

"Looks can be deceiving." She remembered Casey's words to her. Hadn't he said that it would be better if fewer people knew his identity? She didn't know how she'd explain to Dominic anyway that she needed protection from a sick person trying to harm her. The signal that airtime was in ten minutes flashed across the monitor ending their conversation. Again, she felt Dominic watching her and she turned and looked across at him.

"I'm going to have a talk with Mack about the way he's been dividing these stories."

She glanced at the work Mack had given her for the night. Outlined below hers, were Dominic's stories. She couldn't figure out how he thought Mack cheated him. In her judgment, he got the quality stories, rather than quantity. The man couldn't tell a good news item from a bad one.

When it was time for her to give her segment, she couldn't relax, feeling his intent stare as he watched her every movement. With an effort, she shoved thoughts of him to the back of her mind and got on with finishing the last of the news. Her father always told her that good news reporters never let outside distractions interfere with the quality of their work. She was not about to let Dominic spoil her reporting.

Slowly, the lights brightened in the room and the camera light blinked off. Tori started gathering her material. When she looked up, she saw Dominic standing just behind her chair.

"What I said earlier about talking to Mack wasn't an idle threat."

"You do what you have to do. See if Mack doesn't think you're foolish."

"We'll see who's foolish," he stated in a clipped tone, before walking away.

As she went in search of Casey, she walked toward Mack's office, expecting to find Dominic there. When she knocked, she looked in and saw Casey sitting across from Mack talking. There was no sign of her co-anchor.

"There you are," Mack said, getting up, with Casey following as she entered the room. "Come on in and grab a chair. There's something I want to discuss with you."

"What is it?" Tori sat down and got comfortable.

"In the next week or so, I'm sending you to cover a story on the homeless people. I'll give you an exact date later. I'd like you to do some interviews. Find out where they've come from and how they wound up on the streets."

She once covered a story like the one Mack was suggesting, but she didn't have someone threatening her life.

Mack studied her features and didn't miss the unrest filling her expression. "You don't have to look so worried. You've always done your work with a camera crew and you'll have Casey with you."

She didn't know he would be willing to give up his evenings to go along with her. This relieved her anxiety. Just the thought of spending all those evenings with him sent a thrill of anticipation through her. "That sounds like a wonderful idea for a story," she murmured, warming to the subject.

"Good, girl. You'll start in about a week, but I'll give you advance notice on what night. I'll have a fill-in for you on the regular news broadcast."

"Okay," Her gaze drifted to Casey.

"Are you ready to leave?" He glanced at his watch. "I have something to take care of this evening."

"Yes," she answered, trying to hide her curiosity over his words. He certainly was in a hurry to end his duties as her guardian angel. Maybe he had a late date. This thought didn't sit too well with her. She picked up her handbag and joined him near the door.

"Thanks for your enthusiasm," Mack told her as she opened the door.

"Whenever you need me, I'm ready," she threw over her shoulder, stepping into the hallway.

Tori kept one step ahead of Casey as they walked toward the exit. She reached for the door handle and he stopped her with a hand over hers.

"What's your hurry?" His gaze narrowed.

"I thought you had to be somewhere this evening," she answered.

"I'm not in that big a hurry," he smiled at her, releasing her hand and pushing against the door to open it.

They made their way the short distance across the parking lot in silence. She couldn't begin to figure him out. He said he had somewhere to go, but now it didn't seem that important to him. When they reached his car, he unlocked her door and waited until she was comfortable in the seat.

Tori watched him walk around the car to the driver's side and felt her heart race at just the sight of him. As he joined her in the front seat, she quickly looked away to hide her intense interest in him. Hearing the engine fire into life, she glanced across the seat, watching him as he left the parking lot. The strong hands that held her earlier at the studio shifted gears. His arm muscles rippled with the small amount of exertion it took and she became fascinated watching him. When she felt his gaze on her, she quickly looked away in embarrassment.

"How many years have you known Dominic Charles?"

It took Tori several seconds to respond since her mind had been so preoccupied with her private thoughts. She gathered her wits about her and tried to remember when she'd first met Dominic. "He started at the studio six months ago," she answered, noticing his interest in looking through the rear view mirror. She'd noticed him doing it several times since leaving the studio.

"How well do you know him?"

She thought over his question silently. How well did she really know Dominic? There wasn't one thing that she knew about his personal life, except that he had to work his way through college the hard way. Thinking back, she could never remember Dominic mentioning any of his family or anything personal in his life. "Not really well at all." She shrugged her shoulders "He doesn't tell me what he does outside the studio."

"Oh," he said thoughtfully, lapsing into silence.

"Why are you asking so many questions about Dominic?"

"I'm just curious. Are you in a hurry to get home?"

"No," she answered.

"Would you like to stop for something to eat before I drop you off?"

"Sure," she agreed quickly, not wanting the evening to end so early. This time she didn't ask any questions. Whatever his plans had been, she felt encouraged that he'd canceled them to be with her.

He nodded his head and drove in the direction of the restaurant where they'd eaten lunch that day. This must be his favorite place to eat, she thought, or he had someone working there he wanted to see.

He parked and made his way around to her side, opening her door.

She got out and walked with him into the foyer of the restaurant. Glancing around, she tried catching sight of the woman he had talked to earlier. She didn't have to look far.

Her gaze drifted to Tori. She thought she glimpsed displeasure in the other woman's eyes. Was it because she was with Casey again? The young woman linked her arm through his, greeting him with a warm kiss. Tori felt her insides clench. She had to remember that Casey wasn't anything to her. She shouldn't be feeling so frustrated over how he gave the other woman his undivided attention.

While the waitress escorted them to a table, the other woman continued to hold onto his arm. Apparently, she was staking her claim. After Tori and Casey sat, she took their order and left to fill it.

Soft music and candlelight filled the room while they waited for their food. She relaxed and let her gaze move around the interior of the restaurant. Suddenly, her wandering gaze stopped.

Dominic sat at a table across the room and his dark gaze collided with hers in that instant. He nodded his head in recognition and slowly looked away. He was alone, sipping on a tall glass of amber liquid. Before long, the waitress served the food and she kept her eyes from straying to where he sat. She glanced up at Casey and found him watching her.

"Is something wrong?" His shrewd gaze narrowed as he watched her features.

"It's just that I saw Dominic sitting across the room and wondered at the coincidence."

The serving of the food interrupted their conversation. After placing their pizza on the table, she walked across the room to take another order.

"Is this the first time you've ever seen Dominic, outside the studio?"

"If you mean socially, then the answer is no." She didn't mention that she thought she saw him earlier that day. It was only a fleeting glimpse of his profile as he walked near the restaurant.

"Maybe he just loves Italian food," he laughingly commented, wiping his mouth on his napkin. Her gaze met his. His gaze didn't hold any sign of laughter in it.

"That may be the case." She felt confused over his reaction. After two glasses of wine, Tori's mood began to mellow. She refused a third glass and watched as he pulled bills out of his wallet to pay the check.

When they left the restaurant, he placed his arm snugly around her waist as they walked to his car. She got in and leaned her head back against the velvet upholstery. He joined her and they drove across the city without talking.

As they walked to her apartment, she unlocked the door and turned to him. "Thanks for feeding me twice today." Should she invite him in for a drink or just let things remain the same between them? The kiss he'd given her was only for show. She knew she was reading too much in her reaction to his passionate kiss that day. "Goodnight," she murmured softly. "I'll see you tomorrow evening."

"This will only take a minute," he told her as he followed her inside. "I want to do a walk through of your apartment. This will ease my mind." He disappeared into the hallway. It wasn't long before he joined her again.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes, all clear," he told her. "Goodnight, Tori."

She nodded as she watched him walking into the hallway outside her apartment and closing the door behind him. For a long time, she stood near the door listening, hoping that he might change his mind about leaving and want to spend more time with her. Only silence greeted her. She turned toward her bedroom, drowsy from the effects of all the wine she'd consumed.

She'd see him tomorrow evening, she thought, and suddenly felt her spirits lifting. Not only did she have that to look forward to, but also her assignment on the homeless should start soon and he'd be with her even more.

She undressed for bed and crawled beneath the covers. Again, thoughts of Casey consumed her as she tried falling asleep. She was almost asleep when she thought she heard a noise in her apartment. Getting out of bed, she reached for a flashlight and crept silently into the living room.

## Chapter Four

The outline of a man disappeared through the door into the hallway. Fright paralyzed Tori for seconds. She covered her mouth to silence her scream. This couldn't be happening. Someone had wandered around in her apartment and she felt violated by the unknown intruder.

Making her way over to the door, she reached for the lock and clicked it in place. She peeked through the tiny hole in the door. The only thing she could see was the tail end of an overcoat as the elevator door closed behind the man. She couldn't stop the thoughts filling her head. She shuddered realizing he broke into her apartment once she was in bed. Had he come into her bedroom and watched her sleeping?

She walked over and switched on the lamp. Looking around the room, she checked to see if anything was missing. Lying on the coffee table was the familiar looking envelope. She picked it up and removed the letter. Scrawled across the sheet was the same cryptic message. She quickly replaced it on the coffee table as if it were too hot to handle.

Her hands trembled as she picked up the phone. She dialed Casey's number. While she waited, several thoughts filled her head. Why hadn't her stalker harmed her tonight? She would have been defenseless against any attack.

The answering service came on the line after only three rings. Tori felt so threatened she couldn't control the waver in her voice as she left the message for Casey to call. Minutes passed before her phone rang. When she heard his deep voice, relief swept through her. "This is Tori," she said shakily.

"What's going on?"

"Someone just ran out of my apartment and I found another letter on the coffee table," she cried.

"Make sure you lock up. I'll be there in a few minutes."

The sound of the line disconnecting filled her ear. She'd already locked the door so the waiting began. Pacing the living room floor nervously didn't help. Before much time passed, her doorbell rang. Checking the hallway through the peephole, she sighed seeing Casey. Unlocking the door, she fell into his arms, muffling a sob. His arms cradled her gently against his chest, letting her transfer her fear to him.

He walked with her over to the couch. "I'll be right back."

Moving through the apartment, several minutes passed. To Tori, it seemed hours. When he returned, he sat next to her.

"I was just making sure whoever ran from here didn't have an accomplice hiding."

She glanced at him and could still feel the fear clutching her heart. Tears rose in her eyes over the frightening experience. Tori felt his tenderness as he wiped the tears away with his fingertip. "I'm not staying alone tonight. If he could get in so easily the first time, there's no telling when he'll be back."

"I agree," he said soothingly, reaching out and pulling her again into the safety of his arms. Holding her gently against him, he rocked her as if she were a small child. As he held her, he could feel the tension starting to ebb from her.

What started as a soothing gesture slowly began changing. Her gaze lifted to his rugged features. She felt lost in the blue gaze watching her intently. Seconds passed and she felt how he continued to hold her gaze captive. When his lips slowly moved toward hers, she lifted her mouth seeking his. She wanted to feel his strength flowing into her. She needed the courage he generously offered her. Tori didn't hesitate in accepting it.

She felt Casey covering her mouth with his and ravaging her smooth lips in a possession that rocked her insides. She continued to watch him as he raised his head and took his time in studying her glazed green eyes. Tori felt his mouth claiming her soft pink lips offered so willingly to him. The next sensation she felt was his tongue prying them open to receive him.

Tori could tell he felt as excited as she did by how his eyes filled with desire he wasn't trying to hide. Again, he pulled back for an instant and she knew he wanted to study the dreamy look that covered her delicate features. She figured he wanted to make sure all the fear had left her and she would be more receptive to his lovemaking.

She felt how gently he lifted her and walked through her apartment to her bedroom. Tori didn't make any form of protest over what he was doing as she felt how he continued to possess her lips hungrily. When he reached the soft quilt covering her bed, she felt the mattress give as he placed her on it.

Tori unbuttoned her pajamas and removed the garment letting the top and bottom drop to the floor. She loved her captive audience as he stood looking down at her smooth, milky body outlined against the blue satin sheet.

When he stripped off his clothing, it didn't take him long to join her on the bed. She could feel how his eyes feasted on her perfectly rounded body. It didn't look to her as if he could get enough of looking at her.

She loved how he became her captive audience. She felt wild with wanting Casey. She forgot all her problems as she felt caught up in the web of desire winging its way through her heart. She didn't miss how he continued to watch her with a half-lidded look, while his gaze flamed out a silent message of how much he wanted her. Desire radiated out to her from his dark gaze.

Her body quivered with the passion she'd been holding in check. Her gaze devoured every inch of him and she lifted her hands wanting to explore his bare muscled body. Abandonment coursed through her when she felt his hair-roughened chest.

When their warm bodies touched, she let her hands roam his waist on down to his muscular thighs. It didn't take her long to find his protruding cock all hard and ready to please her. Wondrous sensations coursed through her as she continued to glide her hand over his enlarged dick.

Her caresses were sending him into a frenzy of desire. Tori watched Casey as he moved his head down her sleek body, finding her dewy pussy with his flickering tongue. She couldn't stop the quivering sensations her body made. There was a demand in her movements that was telling him to appease her.

She noticed he wasn't in any hurry, taking his time and licking away at her soft body with wet firm swipes. When his lips attached to the meaty portion of her clitoris, she began thrashing her legs back and forth in the heat of the moment. Tori tried to tell him to make love to her without saying it in words. It didn't take him long to mount her and begin possessing her. She felt his hard penis driving its way into her sweet cavity with rhythmic strokes.

At first, it felt painful to her. Her body stiffened a little. Casey must have felt her reaction because he slowed his lovemaking, making it gentler until the pain subsided for her. The gentleness brought on a climax for Tori and she shuddered in ecstasy over the sensations filling her.



Before long, she felt him release his hot juice inside her waiting vagina. For a long time, she welcomed how he lay on top of her refusing to break the union between them. Wonder filled her when she felt his penis hardening again. He possessed her again, but this time with more gentleness. It didn't take Tori long to reach another climax and felt Casey doing the same.

Casey's arm circled her waist as she drifted into a state of lethargy. She could hear his heavy breathing and knew he must have fallen asleep. In her sleepy state, she felt him rolling to the side, but she refused to release his arm draped around her. Tori snuggled against his broad chest, giving her the feeling that nothing could happen to her as long as Casey was at her side.

\* \* \* \*

She blinked her eyes open and sat up in bed. Last night seemed unreal to her, but she knew in her heart it happened. She turned her head and looked for any sign of Casey. He was gone, but an indentation on the pillow proved he'd slept there the night before. She heard noises in the kitchen as she pulled her robe on and made her way into the hallway. When she rounded the corner, she pushed the door open and saw him standing near the sink making coffee.

The only clothing he wore was his slacks. She couldn't move as her gaze drank in every inch of the body that had claimed her long into the night. She could feel her blood singing through her veins over the thought of wanting to feel his possession again.

In all the months she'd dated Josh, she had never felt this feverish sensation to have him make love to her. He'd often tried, but she had always refused. Casey entering her life had changed her outlook on things. She hadn't even considered refusing his lovemaking last night. She'd participated, enjoyed his passionate demands, and wouldn't change a moment they'd shared.

"Coffee?"

She watched how he looked over his shoulder and his gaze settled on her delectable body. "Yes, I'll take a cup." She dropped her gaze feeling suddenly shy. She knew the look he was giving her. One word would be all it took before she agreed with his silent idea.

He made his way across the room and gave her the cup of coffee. She watched as he pulled out a chair and sat down facing her.

"About last night." His level gaze met hers. "We should never have made love last night."

She blinked in astonishment after listening to him, but not really understanding. They had shared a passionate night, filled with desire for each other and he was rejecting it as if it had never taken place.

"Why are you taking this attitude?" The hurt flowed through her heart. Pushing the pain to the back of her mind, she silently thought over his words trying to understand him. Maybe he didn't want a relationship and thought she might try to make more over what they'd shared. He might be thinking

she would make demands on him that he wasn't ready to accept. She didn't intend letting him see just how much his words had disturbed her as she gave him a straightforward look waiting for his answer.

"I never let emotions interfere with my work," he uttered hoarsely, dropping his gaze from her stricken look. "I could make mistakes if I get too close to a client and I wouldn't want to put you in any danger."

"Yes, you're right!" She gazed across at him. It looked like he was dictating their lifestyle and she had no say in it. "It was a mistake that will never happen again." She watched how he studied her face for several seconds longer before lifting his cup and drinking the rest of his coffee. The look on her face showed that she didn't take rejection well.

"Now that we've cleared things up, there are some things we need to discuss."

"Go ahead, I'm listening." She raised her head hoping to hide the distress filling her over his ultimatum.

"What do you know about Dominic's background and his personal life?"

"I don't know anything about his personal life. Why are you asking about Dominic?"

"I'm curious about everyone," he told her in a vague tone. "You can never rule out anyone. Have you noticed anyone having a different attitude toward you?"

She had, but she hadn't made a big deal of it. She'd put Dominic's attitude down to professional competition. She didn't feel as if she should mention Scot's resentment toward her. She replaced him more than two years ago so why would he suddenly decide to harm her?

"Well?" His eyebrows lifted.

"Dominic's jealous of the stories Mack gives us. He's made a few remarks."

"What kind of remarks?"

"He believes Mack's singling me out for the plum stories because of my father."

"I knew your father worked for the station, but I can't see what that has to do with it?" His gaze narrowed.

"Mack and my father were close friends. Dad died on an assignment Mack sent him on I believe Mack blamed himself for his death and has taken a special interest in me since then."

"I see Dominic isn't the only one I want to find out about. There are several others."

"Hold on a minute!" She said in disbelief. "I can't believe anyone at the studio would go to those lengths to get rid of me."

"Wake up and see the real world around you. One of these days you're going to find out that things are different today."

"I'll have you know I see things in perspective." She could see the angry expression covering his features at her naive attitude.

"You'll come to your senses one of these days, but it might be too late." He stood and walked over to the sink, running water into his cup to rinse it. "Pack your bags, you're moving tonight." He broke into her private thoughts. "We'll wait until three or four in the morning to leave. Whoever is watching has to sleep sometime."

"Should I mention this to Mack?"

"You're to tell no one. Leave your recorder on and I'll check your messages each day. If there are any calls you need to return, you can make them later."

She nodded her head as a relieved expression covered her features. The thought of finally feeling safe settled through her thoughts.

"If I can't find another apartment this afternoon, I'll camp out on your couch tonight."

She didn't say anything. She knew it would take all her willpower not to think about him sleeping so close to her if he did use the couch. Another thought swiftly took its place. She had her pride to maintain, and he had made it clear how their situation stood. She'd do her darndest to keep her emotions in check where he was concerned. "I'm going to shower and dress for work. You're welcome to use the bathroom after I've finished."

She removed her clothing from the closet and carried them into the bathroom. Standing under the warm spray, she tried not to let her thoughts dwell on the situation she found herself in now. When she finished dressing and applying her make up, she walked toward the kitchen, her bare feet padding softly against the carpet. Pushing open the door, she saw Casey sitting at the table without his shirt.

He didn't hear her and she took the few precious seconds to let her eyes feast on his brawny chest, covered with a mass of dark hair. She made a slight movement, and his gaze lifted to where she stood. "The bathroom's all yours," she said, keeping her voice as even as she could. She could feel her stomach and chest twisting into knots just looking at him.

"I didn't mean to sound so abrupt earlier, but I have my reasons for keeping our relationship platonic." As she listened to him, she couldn't hear any trace of emotion in his voice.

"I understand perfectly." She knew he was right, but she didn't like it. "I'll make sure I follow all your rules."

Casey stood up and walked around the table. "I'll be ready to leave in a few minutes. If you don't mind, I'll drop you off a little early at the studio. This will give me a chance to find you another place."

She nodded her head as she watched him walk from the room. Making her way into the bedroom, she removed her shoes from the closet. She carried them into the living room to wait until he finished showering. She heard a noise and glanced up to see him entering the room. His hair glistened with droplets of water causing her pulse to speed up. The only thing she could do was to drop her gaze before he could read what her thoughts really were.

“Ready?” He walked over to the door to wait for her.

“Yes,” she murmured, following him out. She noticed how quiet he was on the elevator ride down to the main lobby. She remained silent as well.

After driving across town to the studio, they entered the building and made their way through the hallway. Everything seemed too quiet, which made her wonder if she was the first to arrive at work.

Suddenly, loud, angry voices filled the hallway. Her gaze lifted wondering what was going on. She glanced at Casey and noticed his curious look.

## Chapter Five

Mack’s office door stood open. Glancing into the room, she saw Mack and Dominic standing near Mack’s desk. Off to the side, Scot hovered behind the office door.

“I’m not going to tell you again!” Mack sputtered heatedly. “We’re going to do things my way, or you’ll be looking for another job! Your accusations are not only absurd, but irresponsible.”

“Is that what you believe?” Anger covered Dominic’s face. “As for doing things your way, well, we’ll just see.” He raised his hand toward Mack in a threatening gesture. At the last second, he had a change of mind. He dropped his hand and backed away

Mack didn’t appear troubled by him. When Mack glanced up and saw he had an audience, he quickly clamped his mouth shut refusing to say any more.

Dominic’s head whipped around. When he saw Casey’s hard stare, he, too, refused to continue with the argument. There was little doubt in Dominic’s mind what Casey would do to him if he attacked Mack.

Casey reached for Tori’s hand and pulled her along with him into Mack’s office. He turned and pushed the door closed, shutting out the inquisitive Scot. Tori watched how his gaze moved to the two men.

“Is there a problem here?” Casey asked abruptly.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” Mack answered as his gaze traveled to Dominic again. “We had a disagreement over something that didn’t amount to anything.” His look challenged the other man to say differently.

"Yes, that's right," Dominic eventually answered saying the words, but knowing he didn't mean them.

"Oh," Casey answered in a skeptical tone. Casey's thoughts ran along the same line as Dominic. He didn't sound sincere in what he said. "Well if you're sure everything's all right between you, we're going to leave."

After starting the walk down the hallway toward the studio, Casey looked over his shoulder towards Mack's office. "I'm wondering why Mack's protecting that little weasel. If I find out Dominic's threatening him, he'll have to deal with me."

Tori studied his features. She saw the ruthless expression covering his face after making the remark about Dominic. He wasn't just mouthing the words. He meant everything he said. An unbidden shiver raced down her spine thinking of what kind of adversary he would be. He wouldn't be anyone she would want to cross. The thought that he could be ruthless had run through her mind when she had first met him, and it hadn't changed. "What could Dominic be threatening Mack about?"

"It's hard to say, but I intend to ask Mack when I see him later."

"Do you think he'll tell you? He wasn't letting Dominic get the better of him."

"That's true." He shrugged his shoulders negligently. "I'm going to have to leave in a few minutes if I want to find anything this afternoon. Remember, no one is to know about our plans."

"I understand." Within moments, she heard a noise behind her and turned to find Dominic walking into the room.

Without giving her a clue, Casey pulled her body close to his. He covered her lips in a lingering kiss. She knew it was only a show for Dominic's benefit, but she surrendered willingly and pretended he meant it from his heart.

Instead of releasing her, he snuggled her into the shelter of his arms, giving Dominic the extra time to take in their heated love scene. As he released her, she felt a wobbly sensation flowing through her body.

Before walking from the room, Casey turned and looked at her. With a wave of his hand, he made his way toward the exit. Her gaze followed him until he disappeared.

Why did she feel such an overpowering reaction every time he held her in his arms? All he had to do was touch her and her body reacted with a response that she couldn't explain. This was a new experience for her and she couldn't come up with a logical answer.

"Here are your notes for tonight," Dominic said, interrupting her private thoughts. "Mack told me to give them to you."

Her gaze lifted to his frowning face as she took the sheets. "Thanks."

\* \* \* \*

After the newscast ended and the lights dimmed, she ignored Dominic as her gaze lifted to search the studio for any sign of Casey. When she couldn't spot him, a feeling of panic rose in her. A thought suddenly struck her. This was no way for her to behave. She'd done without Casey's protection this long, so why was she so worried now? The thought of returning to the apartment and spending the night there alone was something she didn't want to do. Gathering her purse, she started the walk toward the exit. As she made her way through the hallway, she almost bumped into the subject of her thoughts as he rounded the corner. She felt the nervousness beginning to ease in her stomach. So much for telling herself, she could do without him. She needed his presence and strength and there was no sense in denying it.

"I'm sorry I'm late, but I stopped to talk to Mack."

"I was going to call a cab and head for the apartment."

He didn't answer as he gripped her arm and led her out through the rear exit of the studio. He walked her to his car and unlocked the door. When she got comfortable in the passenger side, she let out her breath with a heavy sigh.

He got in and closed the door, not starting the car immediately. He turned and glanced at her. "I've found a place for you to stay, but we're going to wait until later tonight to move some of your clothing."

"Where is it?"

"About an hour's drive from the studio." He pulled the car onto the busy street. For several minutes, he kept his attention on the heavy traffic. Eventually, his gaze drifted to her. "I talked to Mack about what we interrupted earlier outside his office."

"What did he say?" She glanced at him.

"Not very much. Only that they were having a disagreement about the stories for tonight's broadcast. Maybe Dominic thought Mack was playing favoritism again."

"You're probably right," she murmured as he pulled in front of her apartment and parked.

"Now, all you have to do is pack and we wait until later to leave," he told her, before getting out and walking around to her side. "I'll pull the car around to the back of the building before you start down so no one can see us leaving."

She nodded and followed him into the empty elevator. They reached her floor and she unlocked her door. When they entered, her gaze followed him as he started through each room, checking for any sign that she may have had a visitor while she was at work.

He returned to the living room, and dropped onto the couch only inches from where she sat. "All clear."

For the longest time, neither said anything. "Would you like something to eat?" She asked the first thing to pop into her head.

"Are you cooking?" He grinned at her.

"I can whip up some scrambled eggs. I don't have anything else thawed."

"Sounds good to me," he accepted, "and I'll help you."

She nodded her head and felt his presence as he followed her into the small kitchen. She began removing the ingredients from the refrigerator and felt all thumbs as she almost bumped into him several times. Glancing across at him, she noticed he was removing a skillet and placing it on the stove. Everything about him set her senses stirring. She finally had to look away and concentrate on what she was doing. The smell of his aftershave still bothered her as it drifted across the short space separating them. She loved the intoxicating aroma.

When they finished cooking the meal, she dished their portions onto plates and carried them into the small dining room. She watched curiously, when he dimmed the overhead light and struck a match to a long candle decorating the center of the table. "Why did you do that?" She waited for him to pull out her chair.

"I guess I'm a romantic at heart." He shrugged his shoulders as he placed their plates on the table and sat down across from her.

"You, a romantic?" She smiled at him.

"Why do you find that so difficult to believe?" His shrewd blue eyes narrowed slightly over her assessment.

"I've always associated toughness with you, not the romantic."

He gave off the air of not putting up with too much when dealing with other people. "There's a lot you don't know about me." His tone was husky. "If it wasn't for this business arrangement, I'd show you just how romantic I am. Because, you see, I do still want you."

She didn't have an answer for his statement. Glancing up, she noticed his penetrating look. Lowering her gaze, she picked up her fork. Her thoughts kept returning to their night of passion and a whirlwind of longing swiftly passed through her. Oh and how she, too, wanted him body and soul, but she couldn't admit that to him. She knew the arrangement they now had was only a business deal and nothing more. Moving the food around on her plate, her appetite suddenly deserted her thinking her private thoughts.

"Aren't you going to eat?" He glanced at her strained features.

"Yes," she murmured, refusing to look his way until she could calm her fluttering reaction to him. Somehow, she managed to swallow the food, but had to drink water to wash it down. When she finished eating, she began gathering her plate and glass to carry into the kitchen. She knew he was behind her without turning and looking. Again, she felt his warmth reaching out to her. "If you want to watch television, I can do these," she said, keeping her gaze lowered because desire for him filled her. There wasn't any way she could hide it. There wasn't a doubt her eyes would give her thoughts away.

"No, I'll help."

She felt awkward trying to act naturally, when in reality, she was all nervous inside at him standing so close to her. At one point, he accidentally brushed against her in the small area. A spark shot through her at the contact. She wondered if it was her imagination working overtime again. Concentrating on washing and rinsing the dishes, she placed them on the rack to drain. From the corner of her eye, she watched him lifting each dish to dry. When they finished the last one, she placed the dishes in the cabinet.

"I'm going to pack a few things for later," she told him, making a hasty exit. Once inside her bedroom, she sank weakly on the bed trying to control her shaking legs. She knew she had to stop this line of thinking, but there was no controlling her thoughts. It was getting so he filled her every waking moment. Her gaze drifted to the bed where they'd shared a joyous night of loving and she had to look away. She got up and walked over to her closet to remove her suitcases. She placed the cases on the bed. When she finished filling the second one, she walked out into the hallway and stopped at the living room door.

He lay on the couch, with his arm draped across his eyes.

From watching his steady breathing, she knew he'd fallen asleep. She walked softly across the room and turned off the television. She chose to sit in a chair near the couch. Picking up the newspaper to glance through, she found her gaze straying away from the printed material, over to where he lay stretched out in sleep. Everything about him excited her senses, until she felt ready to explode with wanting him. When he moved slightly, she quickly dropped her gaze before he awoke and found her watching him. She heard his movements again as he sat up. This time she let her gaze drift over to him.

"Have you got everything packed that you'll need?" He asked in a sleepy tone.

"I'm only going to take two suitcases."

He lifted his arm and glanced at his watch. "Give me a few minutes before you start down the back way." Walking into her bedroom, he came out carrying her luggage. "I'll see you in a little while."

After he closed the door behind him, she glanced around the apartment to make sure she wasn't forgetting something. She made her way into her bedroom and gathered her jacket. As she returned to the living room, she shut all the lights off, except a lamp. Ten minutes passed before she walked to the door and peeked into the hallway. There wasn't any sign of anyone about at this hour, so she hurried along the carpeted floor toward the staircase leading to the exit. When she opened the door at the



back entrance, she found Casey sitting in his car waiting for her. Tori glanced around before making her way across the short space. She got in the car and reached over locking her door.

He drove away from the apartments and onto the highway. An hour later after heading the car in a southerly direction they left the main road and turned toward a residential area. The houses began to thin out after a time. Eventually, he turned down a street toward an isolated property a few miles from any of the other homes. He pulled up to a two story, log cabin structure.

Her gaze narrowed in surprise. She thought he rented an apartment, not a house of this size. "How did you find this?"

"I own it," he answered. "There are enough rooms in there to get lost in." He waved his arm toward the front facade of the building. "I haven't used it in months."

"If you don't live here, then where do you live?" Her gaze lifted to his moonlit face.

"In an apartment close to my office. In fact, it's not too far from the one you lease. It's more convenient for me with all the jobs I take on."

"Oh," she murmured, getting out of the car and following him up the walk.

Casey unlocked the door. He reached for her arm as they entered the dark hallway, filled with a smell of mustiness. "I should have mentioned we might have to dust and clean a little. It's been a month since I was here last."

## Chapter Six

Within seconds, he touched a wall switch and the overhead light gleamed brightly. She blinked as her gaze drifted across the hallway. An ornate staircase built of strong oak wound around in a circular pattern and climbed to the second level of the house. Old fashioned, looped rugs in variegated colors and design partially covered the shiny wooden floors. The overhead light reflected brightly onto the floor, bringing a glowing sheen to the polished wood. It was as if she stepped into another era of time. This looked like an eighteenth century home. Something about the period fascinated her. Several paintings hung on the walls looking authentic and fitting the scheme. "This is beautiful," she remarked with enthusiasm, her gaze shifting to the room off to her right.

"I thought you might like it." He walked across the hallway and turned on a lamp before she entered the spacious living room.

"When did you buy the house?" She followed him into the room filled with a red brick fireplace, end tables, a liquor cabinet and an antique chair and couch.

"A few years ago."

She watched as he made his way over to the fireplace and placed several logs inside the grilled grate covering the front.

"I had to search antique houses all over the area to furnish it. It was time consuming, but well worth the effort."

"You've done a wonderful job."

"Thanks." He struck a match and lit the dry logs. Flames slowly shot up through the dark chimney filling the walls of the room with dancing images of firelight.

She moved across the room and gazed at a painting depicting an early western scene. A well-known artist had scribbled his name across one corner of the graphic picture. Her gaze drifted toward the jutting mantle on the fireplace, where she noticed framed pictures of a man and woman. The woman looked delicate and petite, but the resemblances between the two men were uncanny. "Are they relatives?" She picked up the picture for a closer look.

He turned and glanced at what she held in her hand. "That's a picture of my mother and father, right after they were married."

"You look just like your father."

"Yes, we did look alike," he answered in a low tone.

"You did look alike? Where are they now?" Curiosity filled her about the mysterious Casey O'Rourke and his life before she met him.

"They're dead." He reached down and pushed the rod against the logs a little harder.

From the tone of his voice, it sounded as if he was angry about something. "I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?"

"No, I was just remembering the circumstances of their deaths."

"If you want to talk about it, I'm willing to listen," she murmured softly.

For several seconds he remained quiet. Eventually, he said, "An intruder broke into their home and killed them. I'm not going to go into the gory details because they're not too pleasant. The police investigating never did find out who did the crime though." His tone became more subdued. "That's when I decided to make my life work in helping other people threatened by someone."

"How terrible for you." She realized how much pain he must have suffered.

"It was, but I've adjusted to it by the feeling of gratification I get in helping others." He was quiet for several minutes as he leaned down and again poked at the burning logs in the fireplace. This time it was with a less hostile action.

She watched the closed look covering his face and knew he wanted to drop the subject. She was almost sorry she'd brought his haunting memories back to the surface again.

"There's one thing we didn't think about before leaving your place," he said, changing the subject abruptly.

"What is it?"

"We'll have to bring your car out tomorrow evening, after you get off work. It may look suspicious if it's there and you aren't."

"You could be right," she murmured, sitting on the couch and feeling suddenly very tired from the strain of the last few days. She lifted her hand and tried stifling a yawn.

He grinned across at her. "After I get your luggage out of the car, I'll show you to your bedroom."

He walked from the room and her gaze followed him until he disappeared into the hallway. No wonder people got the impression he was hard and tough. Tragedy had spotted his life, making his outward appearance rough. Within a short time, he made his way back in carrying her cases.

"Are you supposed to start on that new assignment next week?"

Gone was the unrest that filled his gaze earlier when talking about his parents. "Mack did mention that it was going to be Monday."

"We'll move your car tomorrow evening then." He started up the winding staircase and she followed close behind. He reached one of the doors and set her cases down before opening it.

As it opened, she glanced inside. A canopy bed dominated the room, with a matching oak dresser and bureau. On the dresser were tiny figurines, adding a feminine touch to the interior. She fell in love with it on sight. "You do have good taste." She moved over to the window pushing the colorful drapes aside. She couldn't see too much outside because of the darkness, but she did notice several trees to the back of the property once the moon drifted from behind some clouds.

"Thanks," he said. "The bathroom is over there." He pointed to the opposite end of the room. "If you need anything, just call out. I'll be right downstairs."

She nodded as he walked from her room. She made her way over to the bed and removed her pajamas from her case. Walking toward the door he had motioned to earlier, she opened it and entered the bathroom. When she left the shower, she dried off and dressed in her pajamas. A wave of exhaustion hit her as she pulled down the cover and crawled beneath it. While she lay in bed, she thought she heard noises coming from outside the house. Keeping the room in darkness, she made her way over to the window. She pushed the drapes aside.

In the patch of moonlight, she saw Casey standing near the house with an axe in his hand, chopping a stack of logs for the fireplace. She continued to watch his every move as her gaze devoured his muscular body outlined against the dark wooded area. Yearning filled her watching him. She needed to feel those strong arms cradling her again. He had made his position clear, and her stubborn pride wouldn't let her start anything between them. No, he would have to make the first move toward her.

When she saw him picking up the wood and starting for the house, she walked over to the bed and crawled beneath the cover. She listened and heard the door slamming and logs dropping into the container near the fireplace. It wasn't long before everything became quiet. Reaching up, she fluffed her pillow. She didn't think she'd sleep since this was a strange house to her, but she was wrong. She drifted off feeling secure, which she hadn't felt in the last few weeks.

\* \* \* \*

The next day she awoke to a knock on her door. It took her a moment to orient herself to her unfamiliar surroundings as her gaze moved around the room. "Yes," she called out sleepily.

"Come on, Lazybones, it's getting late." His deep voice floated through the wooden panel to her.

"I'll be right with you." She didn't waste any time in getting up and gathering her clothes for the day. Again, she stepped into the tub and showered the sleep from her eyes. As she dried off, she looked forward to sharing another day with Casey. Her pulse beat swiftly at the thought of pretending this was their home and they would soon sit down to breakfast together.

She put very little makeup on and slipped into her shoes before making her way into the hallway. On her way down, she smelled coffee brewing and hurried her steps to find him. As she reached the hallway, she remembered he hadn't shown her where the kitchen was the night before. Following the smell, she pushed open a door and found she'd made the right choice. There were two steamy cups on the table. "Good morning," she murmured as she entered the room. "Why didn't you wake me earlier? I could have helped you cook."

"You needed your rest." He carried the plates over to the table.

"Pancakes are my favorite."

"After having eggs last night, I thought you might want something a little different this morning," he chuckled, claiming a seat across from her.

"You're a man after my heart," she said in a joking tone. She looked up and realized how her words must have sounded to him. She could feel the warmth of a flush covering her face.

"I wonder what it would take to capture it." He smiled, but it never reached his blue gaze.

She ignored his words. She didn't want to read too much into his joking remark. He had set the ground rules and she was going to follow them. After finishing the meal, she glanced at the wall clock above the sink. "We have time to clean the house before I have to go to work," she offered.

"All right. You take the upstairs and I'll do the bottom level. You'll find dust cloths under the sink."

As she left him in the kitchen, she saw that he was rummaging beneath the sink for cleaning supplies as she'd done moments ago. When she got to the second level, she started in her room and soon had everything dusted and cleaned and her bed made. When she came to the next room, she reached out and pushed the door open. As she walked in, her gaze drifted around and she knew this was his bedroom. He had placed some of the clothes he'd worn the night before on a chair.

She spied a picture on the dresser and walked over picking it up. A young woman, with red hair, smiled back at her. There wasn't the slightest resemblance to Casey that she could see, and he hadn't mentioned having any sisters or brothers. A twinge of jealousy found its way into her chest as she continued to study the blue-eyed woman. She looked about nineteen or twenty. Hearing a noise in the hallway, she quickly put the picture back in its original spot and continued with the dusting. She moved to the bed and fluffed up the pillows, smelling the scent of him floating up to her. She savored the smell before putting the pillow back at the head of the bed. After finishing, she walked into the hallway again. She bumped into Casey as he came out of what looked like a storage room next to his bedroom. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you," she murmured.

"I had to put a few things away before we left. We should get started if you want to make it on time." He glanced at his watch. "The traffic may be heavy."

"I'll meet you downstairs." She walked into her bedroom and gathered her things before sliding her cases beneath the bed. When she reached the hallway downstairs, she glanced around looking for Casey. She heard the sound of a car engine starting near the front entrance. She walked out the door and locked it behind her. As she made her way across the yard, she glanced up and noticed how cloudy the sky looked. She felt something wet hit her face and raised her gaze to catch a glimpse of the first snowflakes falling. Tori hurried her steps, because she knew how snarled the traffic would be if it continued snowing. Instead of his car, he was in a jeep and sat waiting for her to join him. She reached out and opened the door then got in.

He saw her questioning look and smiled. "I thought since it's snowing, we should take more reliable transportation. Last year, I nearly got snowed in, so I'm not taking any chances today."

She nodded her head. She wouldn't have minded a bit if they couldn't get out that day. She couldn't let him know her thoughts, though. The idea made her feel warm inside. On the drive to the city, the traffic moved along at a snail's pace. This was just what she expected. The snow kept falling and becoming thicker with every mile. Casey flicked on the windshield wipers, cleaning away the white fluff. Eventually they reached the studio and she noticed how much snow had gathered. The plows churned out the pristine snow into a dirty massive pile clearing the way for motorists.

When they walked into the building, she felt him reach out and grip her hand. As they turned the corner, her gaze lifted to Dominic, already sitting at the desk. He had his dark head lowered, going over his work for that evening.

Scot leaned over Dominic's shoulder saying something to him. When Scot glanced up and saw Tori and Casey, he nodded to them and walked away heading in the direction of Mack's office.

"I'll see you tonight, sweetheart," Casey murmured huskily.

"Yes, later."

After he disappeared through the hallway, she went in search of Joan. She hadn't bothered putting any makeup on and knew she didn't have much time before the broadcast.

\* \* \* \*

Later that evening, Casey waited for her to finish the broadcast and they drove to her apartment to pick up her car. As soon as she got behind the wheel, Tori watched Casey taking the lead. It didn't take too long to reach the narrow lane leading to his home. She drove slowly because of the accumulation of snow. They were almost to his house when she noticed his brake lights shining brightly in front of her. He had stopped just ahead for some reason. She quickly pressed the brake to keep from hitting him. Nothing happened and panic struck her.

## Chapter Seven

The brake pedal went all the way to the floor. She couldn't control the car. Heading straight for Casey, she wrenched the steering wheel around and tried pulling off the road. A tree loomed up just ahead, but she didn't have time to swerve and miss it. A jarring sound filled the night air of metal resting against the wooden surface. Tori flew forward and the only thing stopping her from hitting the windshield was the seatbelt. It didn't prevent her from going sideways and bumping her cheekbone against the metal frame of the car. She felt a pain rip across her face, followed by a wet sensation. When she reached up to touch the spot, she pulled her hand away and saw traces of her own blood coating her fingers. Everything moved in slow motion, but she knew only a few seconds could have passed since the accident. The door flew open and she glanced up into Casey's white face.

"What happened? Are you all right?"

She felt his strong fingers gripping her shoulders and turning her to face him. "I think so," she answered shakily. She watched as he removed a handkerchief from his pocket and tenderly wiped the cut on her cheek.

"Let me help you out." He already reached inside and began removing her seat belt. "As soon as we go inside, I want to check your face. It looks as if it's only a small cut."

She let him lead her out into the cold, crisp night toward the house. He was gentle, wrapping his arm around her waist with a caring gesture. After unlocking the door, he helped her inside to the living room and over to the couch. He walked out of the room and the minutes slowly ticked by for her wondering where he'd gone. When he returned, he carried a small, medical kit and placed it near them on the couch.

"It doesn't look too bad," he said soothingly, removing alcohol and a white bandage from the box. He started cleaning the abrasion using very gentle strokes. When he finished, he rubbed some ointment on it then put a strip of the gauze across the wound. "There, that should take care of it. I have one more thing to check. Look into the light while I check your eyes. You could have a concussion."

"I don't believe I hit it that hard," she answered, but she went along with his suggestion.

He took a long time about studying her. Eventually, he dropped his searching gaze. "Everything looks normal."

"I'll bet my eyes are black tomorrow." She lifted her hand lightly touching her cheekbone.

"If it is, Mack will have to replace you. Since it's Tuesday, he'll only have to find someone for three evenings."

Finally, the numbed shock began to wear off her and a new fear entered her thoughts. She'd just had her brakes looked at last month and the mechanic had told her they were all right. Why should they go out all of a sudden without warning?

As if reading her silent thoughts, he gave her a quick look. "Have you had your brakes checked recently?"

"Last month," she murmured in almost a whisper. "I can't figure out what happened, unless someone's been tampering with them."

"I'll have to wait until daylight to have a look. The car's all right for tonight since this is a private road. Try to relax and I'll be right back." He stood up and walked over to the liquor cabinet, pouring out two glasses of amber liquid. When he returned, he handed her one. "Drink this, it should make you feel better."

She watched as he swallowed the contents and grimaced as the fiery liquid hit his throat. He walked back to the cabinet and poured himself another, drinking it as he had the first. Placing his empty glass on the cabinet shelf, he reached down striking a match to the dry logs in the fireplace. She lifted the glass and took a big swallow. The strong potent liquid almost choked her as it passed through her throat. A warm feeling rushed through her following this. As she finished her drink, she felt the effects instantly.

His gaze followed her movements and he reached for the empty glass. Their hands accidentally touched, sending currents of fire racing through her body.

Lifting her gaze to his, her jade eyes locked with his turbulent blue ones. She felt mesmerized by the invisible pull he held her with, and she felt as if nothing could break the contact. She watched as if in a dream his movements toward her. He sat next to her on the couch and reached for her. The suddenness of his actions didn't surprise her. Instead, she looked forward to reaching out to him and enjoying the freedom she would find in touching him again. She knew she'd been waiting for this moment, wondering when she would have the opportunity. Now looked like the time, she thought in wonder.

He held her close against his body and crushed her breasts into the wall of his chest. She could feel the erratic beat of his heart pumping away in excitement. Reaching up, she placed her fingertips across his chest, feeling the pounding swelling to a faster tempo. His face slowly moved in a downward descent toward hers, his mouth capturing her lips in a smothering kiss. The passionate capture held a pent-up desire. It flowed swiftly from him into her.

Tori watched as he reached behind him and shut off the lamp, darkening the room. The firelight traveled across to them with its warmth. She caught the shadowy image of the flame covering the walls with tongues of fire, rising and falling as they burned the logs greedily.

When he pulled her to him again, her glazed stare met his. An orange glow radiated from his blue eyes, caused by the firelight and the passion filling his body. She felt his mouth tenderly capturing hers as his fingers began unbuttoning her blouse. Tori discovered how gentle he could be as he pulled her blouse from her and the only thing in his way was the lacy brassiere covering her peaked breasts. Delight filled her when he smothered his face against her neck, kissing the white, soft flesh with hunger. She felt his fingers pulling the clasp of her brassiere and heard the snap as it fell away from her. Watching him from narrowed lids, she saw his gaze gleaming brightly with the want he felt for her.

Again, she felt his mouth slowly covering her nipple, teasing, and tasting it as if it were sheer pleasure for him. His hand covered the other breast, tweaking it softly until it felt firm and hard beneath his fingertips. He lifted his mouth and moved to her other breast, devouring it as he had done the other one. When he slowly moved downward, kissing a trail across her stomach, she knew this was what she had been waiting for. His mouth traveled down every inch of her body until reaching her moist pussy waiting in anticipation.

She felt delight when Casey moved his tongue to her waiting clitoris, rubbing it across the meaty flesh until it stood firm and hard. He continued to lick away at her clit until he felt her body shivering in ecstasy. She writhed from the constant stimulation he caused. The stimulation invaded every crevice of her body and she longed for more of the same. She lifted her hands and began unbuttoning his shirt, wanting nothing between their warm bodies.

When she finished with the last button, he shrugged the shirt aside and her hands kneaded the hard muscles of his chest. All the while, he continued to make her juicy pussy his sole interest. Eventually, she felt the spasms travel through her body and couldn't hold her legs still as they writhed with the ecstasy she experienced. She felt it was his turn as she reached for his slacks and undid the clasp. The zipper slid open easily. She leaned her head down and her mouth covered his cock that stood iron hard just waiting to invade her body. Tori began moving back and forth in swift movements and felt the shudder pass quickly through his body.



He gently lifted her face back to his and covered her mouth with a kiss that sent her senses reeling. For several seconds, he continued to kiss her and she felt how he pressed his body more firmly against hers. All she could feel in those moments was the warmth of his lovemaking he was giving so freely to her.

Tori couldn't wait any longer for his possession. She knew he must need her as badly as she needed him. She forgot his words of earlier about keeping their relationship platonic. That wasn't going to happen tonight. His cock entered her with slow, deliberate movements. This brought her arousal to a fever pitch. She couldn't hold still as her body writhed and moved beneath his. All the while he made love to her, Tori felt how he continued to kiss her eyelids, move to her neck and then on to her breast. He would then return to the parted lips waiting for his invasion. She felt him stiffen for a moment and thought he was ready to explode his cum in her.

But, he was only taking a breather and holding in the hot juice trying to escape his dick. He slipped down her body again finding her vagina with his tongue. As he ran his tongue in and out, she raised her hips demanding he continue until she could experience the explosion ready to burst from her. It didn't take much more before she felt her body quiver and shake with the eruption of a powerful climax.

Tori felt him leaving her clit behind and sliding easily up her body. He pushed his hard penis inside her wet pussy. The tightness of her cavity surrounded his cock and squeezed it tightly in the opening. Tori matched his movements, feeling the passion flowing from her body. She couldn't get enough of his lovemaking and held onto him showing the extent of her need. The moans filling the room rose into the still night. She finally realized the sound was coming from her.

She could feel Casey's gentleness as he brought her along with him to another explosive climax, kissing every part of her face while she surrendered to the ecstasy he was creating within her. She felt his hands cupping her cheeks and his lips claiming hers again. When his tongue invaded her mouth, she closed her lips over it to keep it captive. She lay back, with Casey still on top and she breathed deeply trying to still her heartbeat. She didn't relinquish her hold on Casey and his penis remained inside her.

Without realizing his intention, she felt how he slowly began to make love to her again, but this possession took more time as she felt the enjoyment in every part of her body. The need for him filled her again until she felt an explosive cum followed by an overpowering climax from Casey. Much later, she lay in his arms, curled next to him on the couch. Listening to his steady breathing, she knew he'd fallen asleep. She closed her eyes contentedly and started to drift off to sleep with him. The warmth of the fire kept them cozy and she didn't bother getting up for a blanket.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning she awoke to find him leaning on his elbow above her looking down into her face. "Good morning," he said seductively, rubbing his muscled thigh along hers.

"Good morning," she murmured softly, satisfaction lining her features over their night of passion. She suddenly felt like a feline, all cuddly and ready to purr.

"I didn't keep my word to you." A serious look suddenly covered his features. "Maybe I can put the blame on the car accident, but that's not the truth. I've wanted you ever since we first met and there's no denying the emotion."

"I've wanted you, as well," she murmured softly, speaking from her heart. She cupped his face with her hands and lifted her lips to his. She felt a stirring attack her again as his mouth obliged her, covering her lips in a sensuous kiss. Suddenly, he drew his mouth away and sat up on the side of the couch. She looked at him in confusion. There was no way she could tell what he was thinking right then. She knew she wanted him again, but it looked as if he was having second thoughts about mixing their business relationship with a passionate one.

"If I don't get up from here, I know what's going to happen," he stood up and reached for his slacks.

She let her gaze feast on his strong body, outlined in the morning sunlight streaming in through the window. She felt she knew every inch of his muscular torso, but she discovered something else about him today. A small white scar ran across his smooth stomach and she reached up to touch it. "How did this happen?"

He turned and she noticed how his gaze drank in every curve that he'd owned so passionately the night before. She could tell by the look that he wanted her again, but in the next instant, she noticed how he quickly wiped his face clear of all expression. Tori knew what his thoughts were. He wanted to keep everything business like between them for now.

"This is from a case I investigated a long time ago. It was a knife cut that I'll remember for as long as I live. When you let yourself get distracted, this is what could happen." His hand slowly ran across the jagged looking scar on his stomach and then lifted to the mark that ran behind his ear.

"Oh," she said, noticing the closed expression suddenly appearing across his face. A jealous sensation raced through her wondering if the scar was because of a woman.

"I'm going to shower and take a look at your car." He reached for his shirt. "There's plenty of food in the refrigerator if you're hungry."

It looked like their night of passion was the last thing on his mind, she thought in bewilderment. It was as if it hadn't happened. He walked from the room and she heard his footsteps on the stairs. She got up from the couch and began putting on her clothing. She made her way to her bedroom and removed clean clothes from her case. Walking into the bathroom, she stripped and turned on the tap, filling the tub with warm water. She stepped into it and leaned her head back against the hard porcelain of the tub.

Last night had been wonderful. She couldn't deny the pleasurable sensations still filling her thoughts. But, it must have been a mistake to him because he was acting as if they hadn't made love. Feeling a tear slip from her closed eyelids over the cool way he'd dismissed what they had shared, she reached up and wiped it away. She had kept her resolve not to start any intimacy between them, although she hadn't refused him once he started kissing her.

Her life had become such a mess in the last few weeks and she didn't know how to make things right. Everything had been so normal for her, until she started receiving the hate-filled letters. Another thought suddenly struck her. She may never have met Casey if she hadn't started receiving the letters. Why did this thought make her feel sad? She didn't have an explanation over the way her jumbled thoughts were running.

After finishing her bath, she dried off and dressed. She quietly made her way downstairs to the kitchen. She didn't see him anywhere, so she made her way toward the front door. When she opened it, her gaze drifted to her car. She caught a movement and saw that he was lying under the car checking out the brake system. She closed the door and walked into the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, she removed bacon and eggs and placed them on the counter. Whipping up some biscuits, she planned to have his breakfast ready when he finished. She finished frying the bacon and placed it on a paper towel to drain. She turned the oven on and placed the biscuits inside.

Hearing a noise outside the house, she lifted the drape to see what it was. He was just leaving the garage in the back and walking toward the front with a toolbox in his hand. She sat down at the table with a cup of coffee to wait. It would only take minutes to fix the eggs once he got back. She heard the front door opening and glanced toward the hallway.

He walked in carrying a long strip of black rubber hose with him. "It's what I thought," he stated in a vehement tone, his mouth clamped in a straight line.

Tori's gaze held a confused expression. "What are you talking about?"

## Chapter Eight

"Damn!" he mumbled an oath as he dangled a rubber hose in the air. He held it closer to the light and studied it a moment longer. "Some dirty creep cut halfway through your brake line causing it to snap in two. That's the reason your brakes held all the way here, but you were losing fluid during the drive."

"What's going to happen next?" She cried, tears forming on her long lashes. This was too real for her and she didn't feel ready to accept it. "The letters were something I could deal with, because they were only sheets of paper. Someone breaking into my apartment and now the car is something that I'm not willing to accept. I can't fathom how anyone could hate another person this much! I'll have to admit whoever is doing this has me frightened to death." A shuddering sob left her lips. The trembling in her body wouldn't stop although she knew he was right there with her and would protect her.

"We're going to get him in the end," he promised, moving across the room to take her in his arms. "He has to slip up sooner or later, and when he does, I'll be waiting for him."

"I hope it's before he manages to kill me," she mumbled in a muffled whisper against his shoulder, thinking he hadn't heard her, but he had.

He pulled her away from him and looked into her troubled eyes. "I'll never let anyone hurt you." His passion-filled tone was low and gruff as it floated down to her. "It's true I slipped up where your cars concerned, but it will never happen again. Are you going to put your trust in me?" His narrowed gaze watched her intently.

"You know I always have."

"I'll never let you down." He stood for a long time holding her tightly to him. Eventually, he reached down with his fingertip and lifted her face to his. "It doesn't look as if your eye is going to get black. Just a little makeup should do the trick in covering the mark on your cheek. If anyone at work asks what happened, no matter who it is, you fell."

She nodded her head and went back into his arms, loving the comfort he offered her. They stood locked together for reasons of their own—his in a protective gesture and hers needing the security he could provide her. After he released her, she could feel his strength flowing through her. She silently decided she wasn't going to let this unknown person beat her down. Fighting back had always been a part of her nature and she felt a new resolve. "If you want to sit down, I'm doing the cooking today." She gave him a warm smile as she watched him pulling out a chair

"I like this," he grinned across at her. "Everything smells good. You didn't tell me you could cook."

"You didn't ask." She placed a platter of eggs filled with the food in the center of the table.

"You should watch out, Tori Connors," he warned lightly. "If you keep feeding me like this, you could get stuck with me." She chuckled over his words, pulling out a chair opposite him. The idea he planted in her mind didn't sound too bad to her. Finding Casey across the table from her every morning would indeed be a pleasant experience. The thought of finding him in her bed every night was a turn on, too. The thought sent a tingly sensation racing through her.

After eating, they washed the dishes and left the house to drive to the studio. He made a turn off the main highway and exited near her apartment. "I have some calls to make this afternoon, so we'll check your answering machine early. If you need anything, you can pick it up now."

"There are a few things I forgot to take." Some of her personal items were still in the bathroom that she needed, but she didn't intend discussing what they were with him.

When he pulled next to the curb and parked, he walked around to open her door. As they were making their way into the foyer of the building, the doorman motioned to her.

"Ms. Connors," he called.

She turned and waited for him to join them. She glanced up into his frowning face wondering what could have happened.

"When I made my hallway check last night, I found your door standing open."

"You did? I know I locked it before I left." There could be only one answer. Her visitor had returned. "Thanks," she murmured shakily, starting to walk away toward the elevator.

"Hold on a minute." Casey placed his hand on her arm as he turned to the doorman. "Did you contact the police?"

"Yes. They checked her apartment out, but one of the officers said he'd call Ms. Connors to find out if anything was missing."

"Do you have the detective's name?"

"He left his card." He reached in his pocket and handed it to Casey.

"Thanks, you've been a real help," he answered, slipping it into his pocket.

The elevator ride seemed endless to her. All kind of thoughts kept racing through her mind over what they would find. Whoever had been in her apartment, had expected to find her there. She shuddered with fright over her hidden thoughts. By the time they stood outside her door, her hands were trembling so much she couldn't put the key in the lock.

He took it from her and opened the door.

Shock was Tori's first reaction when she saw how someone had ransacked her apartment. The lamps lay on the floor and the drawers in her bureau hung at an angle. The kitchen area looked intact. She couldn't find anything missing as she made a thorough search of each room. As she entered the living room again, her gaze drifted to Casey. He had pressed the button on the answering machine and sat listening to the messages. At the end of the tape, the man who had called her with the threat came on the line. It sounded as if he was up to his old tricks again.

The low, gruff voice echoed through the room. As before, the background noises obscured some of what he was saying, but they weren't loud enough for them not to hear his threat.

He snapped off the machine. "The damn coward! He must have broken in the night we left your car here. That must have been when he cut your brake line." He reached for the phone. "Did you find anything missing?"

"Nothing. That's what makes it so stupid. He has to be sick to go to these lengths. She waved her arm around the room.

"I'll nail him." He turned to the phone and began talking to the detective. When he hung up, he glanced at her. "They checked for prints, so we'll have to go to the station and make sure ours are eliminated."

"Why?"

"So they can match them to what they found here."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking straight," she said in a nervous tone. "I should have figured that out myself."

"Leave everything as it is and take only what you need." He shrugged into his jacket as he talked. "I'm going to be busy this afternoon, checking with the telephone company to see if they got a trace on the call. After that, I'm going to the office to see if I have any messages on the fax machine."

"I'd feel a lot better if you didn't leave the studio tonight," she uttered shakily.

"You'll be safe, there," he soothed her. "Just remember, you're not to leave until I get there to pick you up."

"Trust me, I won't leave the building for any reason, after this." She loaded her personal items in an overnight case, and followed him into the hallway. When they reached the foyer, she glanced around for the doorman. She saw him from the corner of her eye.

He walked over to them. "It certainly was a mess, wasn't it?" He said as soon as he reached her.

"Yes, and I can't imagine who could have done it. Did you see anyone unfamiliar in the building last night?"

"No, but whoever it was could have come through when I took my lunch break," he remarked. "We're going to have to check with the manager of the building to see if he'll give all the residents a key to the entrance. This should stop the threats of break-ins."

"That's a good idea," Casey said thoughtfully. "Why don't you call him today and I'll drop by later tonight to find out what he said."

"Will do." The older man tipped his hat and smiled as they walked outside to where Casey had parked his car.

When they were driving away, he glanced at her. "He just made an excellent suggestion. This would stop anymore vandalism to your apartment and you'd be safe there."

"Oh, are you trying to get rid of me already?" She tried making a joke of it, but she didn't feel much like joking. This would mean she'd have to leave his home and she didn't feel prepared to do that. The little time she'd spent with him already had felt like heaven to her.

"That wasn't my meaning at all. We could both use your apartment while you're doing the story on street people. This would save a lot of driving time for us."

"You're right." Relief flooded through her. So, he really didn't want to leave her just yet. This train of thought brought a joyous sensation racing through her. She knew she wanted to spend as much time with him as possible, but she couldn't figure out the reason. Maybe, because she felt he was her protector and she'd feel alone and lost without him. She'd always felt so independent before, but the

man stalking her had changed some of her views on life Before Tori could analyze her emotions, she saw the studio looming into sight.

Entering the building, Mack met them. "Before you leave, Casey, I'd like to talk to you." His gaze shifted to Tori and he studied the mark across her cheek. "How did you cut your cheek?"

"Just clumsy." She felt terrible lying to Mack, but the promise she made to Casey rang in her ears.

"You're going to have to be more careful," he said in a worried tone, his gaze holding a strange look.

"Oh, I will. I have a bodyguard to watch out for me now." She glanced at Casey and gave him a warm smile. As she turned her head, she caught sight of Joan motioning to her. "I'd better get going if I want to be ready on time. See you both later." She waved her hand as she walked away.

When she reached Joan, she saw her inquisitive look. "What happened to your face?"

"I fell," she answered, dropping her gaze over the second time she had to tell the lie about what really happened.

"It looks as if you were in a fight and got the worst of it," she remarked, picking up the creamy makeup and dipping the applicator in it.

As soon as Joan finished her work, she made her way down the hallway toward the broadcasting room. On her way, she glanced toward Mack's office and saw that he and Casey were still inside talking. When she approached the front desk, she glanced around looking for any sign of Dominic. The subject of her thoughts came rushing into the room, his face covered with a red tint.

She nodded her head to him and received a curt nod in return. Her gaze studied his disheveled appearance. His hair didn't look combed and his tie hung at a lopsided angle. He quickly pulled a comb from his pocket and ran it through his dark hair. Straightening his tie in place, he was just in time as the red light blinked on the camera. She sat listening to how he gave his portion of the news. His voice sounded unenthusiastic and it was almost as if he was reciting it. She also noticed how his hands shook nervously as he fiddled with the sheets of paper in front of him.

When it was her time to begin, she forgot everything and gave her all to reporting the news. This wasn't the time to let her personal problems interfere with her work. During a commercial break, she turned and found Dominic watching her. He was looking at the mark on her cheek, and she thought it curious when he didn't ask how she'd done it like the rest of the people at the studio.

Maybe he knew already. If he were the one stalking her, then he'd have figured out what happened to her car. The thought that the man sitting so close to her could actually be the one caused fear to race through her. She could reach out and touch him and she knew he could do the same. He was too cowardly to bring his threats out into the open for her to find out. She brought her thoughts back to the present as she got the signal that the commercial was over and it was time for her to go on again. She deliberately ignored her hostile looking co-anchor and gave her all to the news show.

"That's a wrap," the producer shouted as the bright lights dimmed on the camera.

"Did you and your boyfriend get into it?" Dominic asked in a sarcastic tone. He pointed to the spot on her face.

"I beg your pardon." All along, she had thought he wasn't going to say anything, but she was wrong again. "What are you talking about?"

"Your face," he mumbled, his gaze not looking into hers.

"I don't think it's any of your business!"

"You don't have to snap my head off." He turned away and began removing his work from the desk, never once looking in her direction again.

She watched him in silence as he walked across the room and exited the building. The man was so infuriating that she found she'd been gritting her teeth since talking to him. She silently told herself to calm down because she couldn't accomplish anything with anger. Gathering her material, she leaned back in her chair waiting for any sign of Casey. His instructions rang in her ears of not leaving the building without him. She wondered if he could still be talking to Mack in his office.

Making her way through the dark hallway, she reached the door to Mack's office. She peered inside, but it was empty. She made her way back toward the studio and found a comfortable chair to sit out the wait. A vision of Casey's dark features suddenly danced in her thoughts. She felt a stirring in her insides and wondered at the cause. Her heart began beating out of control the more she thought of him. When she saw him rounding the corner toward her, she knew what caused the sensation to fill her.

## Chapter Nine

Her body shook with a nervous reaction over her discovery. She felt as if she was on the verge of exploding with the shock of it, but a wondrous feeling filled her in those few seconds. She was in love and couldn't believe she hadn't known before. Every time he touched her, she didn't hesitate in going into his arms and feeling his lips on hers—not to mention the wondrous lovemaking she'd experienced with him. She had fallen in love with Casey O'Rourke, without even trying. It didn't matter that she'd known him for only a short time, it only mattered that she knew an overpowering sensation filled her heart, ready to flow out of her.

All through her life, she had waited for that special someone to share her hopes and dreams. She didn't know for sure if she'd found this person in him, but she certainly hoped so. He had made his position very clear to her from the beginning. Mack had hired him to watch over her and he didn't want a romantic involvement. There were no doubts in her mind that she loved him, but would he ever return the searing love filling her insides?



She didn't know much about his personal tastes. The few times they'd eaten together, gave her only a clue to what his favorite food was. As far as hobbies, she didn't know what he did when he was off work. She only knew she'd spend the rest of her time with him trying to find out what made him happy. Trying to look nonchalant, she glanced up at his dark features, loving every little detail and craggy line of his face. She couldn't drag her gaze away from him, and she noticed the frown beginning to settle across his face. Suddenly, she felt tongue-tied, and couldn't think of anything to say to him. What would his thoughts be now, if he knew what she was thinking privately?

"Is something wrong?" He eyed her unsettled face.

"No, I feel tired, is all." She dropped her lashes and refused to meet the blue eyes watching her closely.

When he took her hand as they walked from the building, she felt a tremble spreading through her body at the contact. The aroma of his maleness drifted down to her and she breathed in deeply, loving the familiar scent. She curled her fingers around his, holding onto him as if he was going to get away. More than once, she felt his quizzical glance sweeping sideways to look at her. As they reached his car, he released her and unlocked the door. Once she got inside, she took several quick gulps of air hoping to compose her quivering nerves. The exercise didn't help much, so she focused her eyes on some point in front of her.

"We're going to stop by your apartment on the way home tonight. I stopped earlier and the doorman had already arranged for every tenant in the building to have a key."

"Oh, we're not staying there tonight?"

"There's a lot of cleaning to do first. We can do some tonight and leave the rest for the weekend."

Remembering the phone call she'd received at her apartment, she knew he had been planning to go to the phone company today. She could talk about this and be on safe ground, she figured. She wondered what he'd found out. "Was the telephone company successful in tracing the call?"

"Not so far," he answered, shrugging his shoulders lightly. "Sometimes it takes more than one call to accomplish it."

"What if he doesn't call again?"

"That's not very likely. The guy feels safe and secure, hiding out there somewhere, so he'll call again. People like him feel as if they can never get caught, but his day's coming, I promise you."

When he turned down her street, Tori's eyes widened watching the commotion across from her apartment complex. Police cars and fire trucks filled the narrow street to overflowing. The brick building across from hers was aflame with streaks of fire licking their way out of the broken windows. Sprays of water coated the heated building causing a hissing sound as it touched the scorched areas.

"I wonder if anyone is still in there," she said, reaching for her camera case. She opened the car door after he parked and stepped out onto the pavement. "I'm going to try to get some still pictures of the fire. Do you think you can call Mack and tell him?"

"Sure," he told her, reaching into his pocket for his cell phone.

"Mack, there's a fire across from Tori's apartment that I thought you'd like to cover. It's newsworthy and worth the extra time for the crew."

"I'll have them right out there," Mack told him, "and thanks for calling, Casey."

She had listened to Casey's call before moving to a better vantage point. The fire spread to other portions of the building, engulfing it. When she finished the role on her film, she reached for her notebook and started jotting down notes for the following day. She walked over to a police officer keeping people behind a protective barrier. A yellow ribbon stretched along the street, warning off anyone who tried to get near the sizzling building.

Suddenly, white sparks rose into the atmosphere as something blew up. Electric currents shot through the air like a giant snake, sending sparks into nearby trees and bushes. Gasping sounds came from the onlookers as everyone backed just a little farther away from the inferno.

When everything quieted down a little, she approached the officer. "Sir, do you know if anyone is in the building?" She poised her notebook ready to take down any information he could give her.

"As far as I know, they evacuated everyone when someone spotted the fire and called it in."

"Do you know who called it in?"

"It was the doorman at the apartment across the street."

"What could have caused the fire?" She persisted, noticing the frown of irritation spreading across his face at her continued questioning.

"We won't know until the bomb and arson squad gets here."

"I'm with KLTV Network," she told him. "If you should find out anything more, our camera crew will be along in a few minutes."

He shook his head that he understood, and resumed his job of keeping the crowd behind the thin, yellow barricade he'd erected.

She replaced her notebook in her handbag and turned to look down the street for any sign of the station's truck.

"Did you find out anything?" Casey asked, walking over to join her.

"Not very much. They never really tell a reporter anything of importance. The way I've found out information, is by asking the people standing watching the fire. There may have been someone who was here when it started."

"Let's make our rounds, then," he suggested, nodding to the crowd that was growing in number since they had arrived.

She removed her notebook again and stopped near a couple standing to the back of the street. The man and woman looked to be in their late twenties. On closer inspection, she noticed the small dog on the leash dancing around at the couple's feet. Maybe they were out walking the dog and saw something. "Excuse me," she began, drawing their attention to her. "Were you here when the fire started?"

"We were approaching the building when we saw flames pouring out the windows," the man answered her question. "Normally, we walk our dog earlier, but tonight we had a few things to catch up on at home."

"Did you see anyone near the building?" She began jotting down notes.

"There was something peculiar going on," the woman spoke up. "You remember the man in an overcoat running from the front entrance of the building right before we saw the flames, don't you?" She glanced at her husband and got a headshake in response.

"Yes, now that you mention it, I do remember. From the street lamps, I could tell he was middle-aged, but that's about all." The man had a thoughtful expression covering his face.

"You didn't happen to see if he got into a car."

"No, he ran toward this building," the woman said. "The last I saw of him, he was entering it and disappearing toward an elevator."

"Thanks," she murmured, her mind already filled with the thought that the man who started the fire could be the one stalking her. If he ran toward her building, he may have been trying to divert attention and gain access to her apartment. Since the landlord distributed the new locks and keys to the tenants, he probably couldn't get in before, but this was a perfect solution. The doorman probably left the front door open as he watched the fire.

She tugged at Casey's arm and motioned to a spot away from the crowd. After she made a quick explanation on what she thought, he grabbed her arm and they walked hurriedly inside the foyer of her building. They didn't stop to talk to the doorman as they boarded the elevator to her floor. All during the ride upstairs, her thoughts filled with fright of the unknown. The man may still be hiding somewhere in her apartment. The adrenaline started pumping through her veins speedily as they stepped out of the elevator and walked down the hallway.

When they reached her apartment, it was as she had expected. The door stood open, but the rooms were in darkness. "Stay here!" Casey's order rang out. "If he's in there, I don't want you getting hurt."

"Be careful," she whispered, her heart rising in her throat at the thought that someone could attack him. She moved across the hall and stood with her back pressed to the wall. Breathing was becoming almost impossible as she waited for any word. The minutes slowly ticked by and still, there was no sign of him.

Soon, he walked through the door looking in one piece and she sighed in relief. He made his way over to join her, with his mouth clamped shut in a straight line. "You don't want to go in there!" He stated furiously, anger filling the depths of his blue eyes with a red glow.

"Why, what did you find?" She cried, feeling a hysterical sensation jolting her body.

"Believe me, this man has a sick mind," he rasped vehemently. "I'd like to strangle him if I could catch him."

"You can't shield me." She moved toward the doorway. "This involves my safety and I have to go in."

"Don't say that I didn't warn you."

She straightened and walked almost mechanically toward the open door beckoning to her. As she entered, her horrified gaze drifted around the room taking in the scene. For a moment, she felt sick to her stomach, but she swallowed down the sensation and flicked the rest of the lights on. Fresh blood dripped from the walls. A bright scarlet were now lining the white coloring that had once covered them. She couldn't tell whether it was human or animal blood, but it didn't matter, it was still blood. The cryptic message that had been in the letters sent to her covered every wall in her living room. The impact of seeing such a sight made her knees almost buckle beneath her.

The blood was a sign that she'd never be safe until someone caught the man. He was giving her fair warning of what steps he'd take to get her. In her mind, she knew he had started the fire across the street to gain entry into her apartment. She felt her own blood curdle at the thought that she may not live to see twenty-five as he kept insisting in his messages. Her eyes drifted to Casey, who stood only a few feet from her. He had been watching her face for her reaction as she stood taking in her surroundings. She couldn't hide the fear filling the depths of her eyes, and walked slowly over to where he stood.

He opened his arms and gathered her close. Gently stroking her hair, she leaned against him. He was her strength and she needed to feel some of it flowing from him, into her. This time she wasn't finding the strength that he offered her so generously before. Her mind kept filling with the thought that she may be dead tomorrow at the hands of some unknown stalker.

"We'll not be staying here," he said softly, continuing with his comforting gesture of running his hands through the silkiness of her hair. "I thought we could, but he's shown me there's no possible way. Your safety is more important to me than driving a few extra miles for a story."

"I never want to stay here again!" Warm tears coated her cheeks. "If you don't mind, I'd like to leave now."

He lifted her chin and glanced at her white face. "I'll come tomorrow and move the rest of your clothes to my place."

"I'm coming with you," she said in agitation, the fear so fresh in her mind, she couldn't erase it.

"You'll be safe at my home. No one knows where I live and I've taken special precautions to make sure they don't find out. Let's get out of here."

She nodded, agreeing with his suggestion.

"The crew may have already arrived downstairs," he told her as they walked to the elevator.

"I could never do the story now," she said in a whisper. Trying to think properly and still present a cool appearance to the viewing audience was something Tori didn't think she could accomplish tonight.

"You'll do it, and I'll be right beside you."

She didn't feel as confident as he did, but she let him lead her toward the elevator. On the ride down, she kept her mind blank to what she'd just seen in her apartment. The more she let her thoughts dwell on it, the more frightened she became.

Walking from the building, they were just in time to see the truck roll up the street and park. The camera crew set the camera into position and motioned for her to join them. One of the men handed her a portable microphone, but she still didn't make a move. Casey gently put his hand on her back, urging her forward.

It took all the courage she could muster to look into the bright light of the camera and act as if nothing happened when her world felt topsy-turvy at that moment. When she began reporting the story, her voice faltered as her gaze drifted to her apartment. Giving Casey a look, she saw the encouragement filling his features, so she started again. After several hours of live commentary, she felt drained. Tiredness settled over her and she couldn't shake it. She ended her segment and handed the microphone back to the cameraman.

"Good job, Tori," Mike, who had been holding the camera on her steadily the whole time, complimented her.

"Thanks," she murmured dully, feeling the defeated sensation washing over her again as she glanced at the apartment building where she'd once lived.

"Come on, Tori." Casey placed his arm around her waist as they walked to his car parked nearby. "You look as if you could do with a rest."

"Yes," she said tiredly, joining him in the car.

Once he drove away from the scene, she noticed how he intentionally took another route that she didn't recognize. Several times, he stopped and pulled over to a curb, checking out the area as cars passed them. She didn't have any idea what he was doing, and felt too drained to ask. Eventually, he drove on and approached the main highway, still checking his rear view mirror. She finally decided that he was trying to get them safely back to his home without having someone following. When they finally pulled into his yard, she followed him into the house. She felt safe for the first time all evening. After walking into the fire-lit living room, she turned and looked at him "If you don't mind, I think I'll go to bed."

"Don't you want anything to eat?"

"I'm not the least bit hungry, but thanks anyway. Goodnight." She headed for the staircase.

"Goodnight," he said gently, his gaze following her up the curving stairs.

She reached her bedroom and walked inside, heading straight for the bed. She wasn't going to bother with taking a shower tonight. All she wanted to do was close her eyes and blot out the events of earlier that evening. After putting on her pajamas, she crawled beneath the cover and pulled it to her chin. Vivid pictures danced in her mind of the blood soaked walls. She turned over and partially covered her head with her pillow, trying to block out the scene from her mind. It remained embedded in her thoughts with a haunting clarity. Eventually, exhaustion took its toll on her, but she awoke in the middle of the night and sat up in bed. A scream rose in her throat and she didn't know whether she had screamed or it was just a dream.

Instantly, her door flew open and Casey came rushing in. "Are you all right?"

"I must have had a bad dream," she mumbled in a strained tone.

"Move over," he told her, already pulling the covers down on the bed. He got in beside her and gathered her close to him.

She nestled into the comfort of his arms, needing the security he offered. Not a sexual thought entered her mind as she drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The thought that this was Friday gave her spirits a lift. There was only one more night of news before she had to go on her special assignment. This would keep her away from her work place, as well as her apartment for several days. When they reached the studio, the first person she saw was Scot Carter.

"How are things going?" He asked in an uneven tone, his dark eyes assessing her with a narrow look.

"The same as usual." Her gaze drifted to where Casey stood listening to the exchange. She noted a frown covering his forehead, but he didn't offer to join in.

"I want to get your notes on the fire you covered last night," Scot told her. "We may have to do a follow up story on it later next week. Mack's letting me take your place while you cover your story on the homeless." A smug look lined his aging features.

"Oh, I didn't know. He hadn't mentioned who was taking my place. I'll get the notes and drop them off to you later."

"Leave them in my office." He turned and walked down the hallway

"It looked like he couldn't wait to tell you about Mack assigning him as broadcaster," Casey remarked thoughtfully.

"It was a blow to his pride when I replaced him on the nightly news, but it wasn't my decision."

"Enough about Scot Carter," he told her in a seductive tone. "Come here." His arms reached for her and pulled her to him.

Just before his lips drifted to hers, she gave him a quizzical look. "We don't have an audience now," she managed to say before his mouth claimed hers. She surrendered to the drugging kiss, moving her mouth beneath his and opening her lips for the invasion of his tongue. She felt the fiery response flow through her and snuggled closer against his wide chest. If anyone was watching, she felt oblivious to an audience as she blotted everything out, except the passionate kiss he was giving her.

When he eventually lifted his mouth from hers, his narrow look studied her glazed eyes. A satisfied smile touched his full lips over her response to him. "I'll see you later," he murmured softly, before turning and exiting the building.

She shook her head slightly to clear it, because she knew she had to have her senses about her if she wanted to go on tonight and broadcast the news.

## Chapter Ten

Arriving at Casey's home that night, Tori could feel the restless stirring he had created in her earlier at the studio. After fixing a light snack, and doing the dishes, she wandered into the living room where he sat reading the paper. She stood watching him for a long time, before he noticed her. Suddenly, his gaze lifted to her.

"Why don't you sit here?" His head nodded to the spot near him on the couch.

She didn't need a second invitation. She walked across the room and got comfortable near him, already feeling the heat from his body reaching out to her. It was hard for her to keep from touching him loving him as she did. As he looked at her, her thoughts must have registered in her gaze.

Without saying a word, he folded the newspaper and placed it on the coffee table. As he turned to her, she studied the blue gaze watching her closely. A silent message of desire for her filled them that he didn't try to hide. He reached out and slowly drew her into his arms.

She'd been waiting all evening for such an invitation. When his mouth slowly moved within reach of hers, she lifted her lips and met him halfway. Her arms curled around his neck, pulling his head forward toward her. Moving her lips softly beneath his, she opened them to receive his conquering tongue.

Slowly, he lifted her into his arms and carried her easily up the long flight of stairs into his bedroom. She felt him laying her gently on the quilt in the dark room and could only see a shadowy outline of him standing over her. His fingers worked swiftly in removing her clothing. When she lay in the white moonlight shining through the window, she saw his gaze feasted a long time on her body.

When he joined her on the bed, Tori could feel how tense his muscled body felt against her proving that he couldn't wait to make love to her. As his lips trailed a burning fire down her body, she couldn't hold still as she felt the delightful sensations filling her. His mouth gently moved forward and captured her peaked breast, nibbling tenderly, until she felt ready to explode with wanting him.

Her hands had a will of their own as they curved down his muscular thighs, touching and caressing his throbbing cock. She intentionally moved her mouth slowly toward his penis and captured it between her soft lips. The gliding movements were sending him wild as she felt the shaking of his body. She kept up the repetitive action causing shudders to race through his body. Eventually, her mouth moved up his stomach toward his chest and she used her arms to pull him gently toward her.

This was all the invitation he needed. His mouth captured hers in a searing kiss, letting her want for him build to a crescendo. As his lips moved from her mouth and slowly down her body, she shook with excitement. His mouth finally reached its intended target—her waiting pussy. Once his lips made contact with the meaty flesh, she began thrashing her legs. She loved it when he pushed his tongue into her vagina, knowing that soon his cock would fill the waiting cavity.

Her hands gripped his arms pulling him up to join her. She let him know by her look that she couldn't wait any longer for him to make love to her. Tori felt surprised at how he took her with a heated frenzy. She began moving beneath him matching his swift rhythmic strokes. It seemed he was trying to drive away the demons invading her life in recent weeks. She felt an explosive climax fill her and then one coming from Casey. The juice of his hot cum filled her pussy to overflowing. Long into the night, she felt Casey returning to her and carrying her off into a blissful, desire-filled, heated passion until both lay saturated and exhausted.

All through the night, she snuggled close to his heated body. She felt how his arm snaked around her waistline, pulling her protectively against his hard length. She nuzzled her head between his chin and shoulder, loving the dreamy sensation of being so close to him and feeling his muscular strength outlined against her.

\* \* \* \*



When she awoke the next day, she was alone in bed. She reached for her robe and stood up. Her thoughts on catching him before he left to bring her belongings back from her apartment filled her head. The memory of what happened between them the night before came flooding back in on her, and a delicious sensation of pleasure filled her thoughts. He managed to chase away her worrisome thoughts for the night, but they would soon be back now that he wasn't with her.

She shuddered as she remembered the haunting image of her apartment. Suddenly, her thoughts turned unexpectedly to her father. She wondered if any of this would be happening to her if he were alive. There really wasn't an answer, but somehow she felt the events taking place in her life might have some connection to him.

Making her way downstairs, she walked softly into the kitchen and found Casey brewing coffee. He was reaching into the cabinet for cups and must have heard her entering. He turned and his gaze reached out to her.

"I thought you may have wanted to sleep longer," he said, smiling, as he poured her a cup and carried it over to the table. "You had a very busy night. I'm going to leave in a few minutes to get the rest of your clothing."

"Please don't take too long." She knew in her heart that she was safe at his home, but she still felt wary about staying alone.

"I'll hurry," he promised her, standing and finishing the cup of coffee he held in his hand. He walked around to where she sat and leaned down, kissing her lips soundly.

Watching him walk from the room, she got up to follow him into the hallway. He shrugged into his heavy jacket near the door and glanced at her over his shoulder.

"Be careful," she murmured and felt surprised when he leaned down and touched her lips again in a light kiss.

"That's the second time you've told me that in the last twenty-four hours. It's you that we have to worry about, not me." He turned to the door and lifted his hand to wave to her. Before leaving, he winked at her.

She felt the cool draft of air fill the hallway as the door opened. Peering through the drapes, she watched until he drove out of the yard and his car disappeared around the bend in the road. A few snowflakes had begun drifting across the yard adding to the accumulation already present. She raised her gaze to the sky noticing the dark clouds beginning to gather. It was only the middle of November, but you could never tell about the weather conditions in New York. The fall had been brief, with winter just on its heels.

Before walking away from the door, she made sure she locked it and put the night chain in place. The big house felt so quiet with him gone. It was almost eerie. She wandered back into the kitchen, washed the cups, and emptied the coffee pot. By the time she made her way from the room into the hallway, everything looked neat and clean. Keeping busy was the thing she needed to do. Going to her

bedroom, she made the bed and straightened the room. As she wandered through the house, dusting and cleaning, she began to feel more at ease over his absence. Nothing could hurt her here. She realized how foolish she was behaving.

Her next stop was Casey's bedroom. Opening the door, she stepped inside and could smell the aroma of him filling the room. Her gaze studied the bed, where they had made passionate love the night before. She pretended he was there with her and she lay back down, closing her eyes, reliving everything. When she opened her eyes, she studied the room and her gaze drifted to the dresser. There wasn't any sign of the photograph of the young woman with the red hair. Thinking back, she didn't remember seeing it this morning when she'd gotten up.

As she looked around, she noticed a thick folder lying on the bureau. She got up from the bed. Temptation to look through it rushed through her veins. She stopped before reaching for it. This would be snooping. She shook off her curiosity as she changed the linen on the bed. As she started to walk to the door, the thick folder caught her eye again. What would be the harm in looking through it? She reasoned. No one would know, but her. Her reporter instincts took over as she edged closer to the oak bureau.

She slowly lifted the bulky package from its resting place and carried it over to the bed. She gently placed it on the quilt and stared at it for several seconds, still undecided. Her curiosity got the better of her as she carefully lifted the cover. Her eyes feasted on a stack of impressive looking documents and awards. When she began reading the material, she felt almost as if she was spying into his past, but this didn't stop her from sifting through the entire stack.

A frown settled across her brow when she came to the last of the papers. Why hadn't he mentioned that he'd served with the Federal Bureau of Investigation for five years? The short time he had worked with the elite group had brought him several awards for bravery and meritorious service. She had no idea, until this moment, that he once was an undercover agent. He did look the part as she'd first discovered after meeting him. She hadn't really known what he did before becoming a private investigator. Mack hadn't told her and Casey certainly didn't mention it.

She silently wondered what brave acts he'd performed to get such a stack of awards. All along, she'd known he gave her confidence with his strength, and she now understood why she felt those sensations. Making sure she placed the papers back into the folder as they'd come out, she carried it to its original position on the bureau. She walked over to his closet and opened the door. Inside, she found his clothes hanging neatly, but above the clothing rack, was a shelf. She rose on tiptoes to get a better look at what was on it.

Her hand rose to her mouth as she noticed a gun lying on a bed of felt. The weapon looked menacing, although she knew it was harmless if left alone. Her gaze remained fixed on the blue-black sheen of the long barrel and she shuddered inside wondering if he ever used it for protection, or to protect someone. Quickly closing the door, she hurried out of the bedroom feeling guilty over digging into his privacy. A feeling of safety again washed through her over the facts she'd discovered about his life before she met him. She walked downstairs and headed for the kitchen. Looking at the clock on the wall, she saw that two hours had passed since he left. She opened the refrigerator and looked inside. Removing a succulent roast, she set about preparing it for his return.

Four hours after Casey left, she heard a car door slam in the drive. She hurried through the hallway, with anticipation and pushed the drapes aside to peek through. Her gaze widened in surprise when she saw the woman walking toward the door. This was the same woman with the red hair in the picture on his dresser. She got out of the car carrying a small overnight case. The picture didn't do the young woman justice. She lifted the chain from the lock, but didn't have time to unlock the door, and stepped back as the woman inserted a key and the door flew open.

She entered the hallway with a bounce to her step. "Oh!" she cried in alarm, almost bumping into Tori in her haste. "Who are you?"

"I'm Tori Connors, a friend of Casey's."

"You look very familiar." Her brows lifted. "Have we met before?"

"No, I don't believe so. I do the nightly news on television."

"That's where I've seen you before. Oh, where are my manners? I'm Jenny Newfeld. I've been dating Casey for the last six months, and when he didn't call last week, I decided to drive down." The statements flowed from her. "By the way, where is Casey?"

"He had some business to take care of. I'm sure he'll be back shortly." She didn't know how she kept the pain from entering her tone when she had heard Jenny Newfeld's announcement about dating Casey. She didn't know he had a romantic involvement with anyone, let alone this young woman. She'd given herself freely to him without a thought that he may have made a commitment to someone. Another mistake she'd made was to fall in love with him.

He hadn't made any promises to her, but she still felt betrayed. They had been through so much together in the last few weeks that she felt a part of his life now. It seemed she'd known him for years, instead of only a few weeks. "Excuse me for a second," Tori spoke up, trying to hide the tremble in her voice. "I'm going to check on the roast."

"I'll go with you," Jenny offered, following close behind her into the warm kitchen.

She didn't want the woman with her, but she didn't think she had a right to say so. It must be serious between the young Jenny and Casey, if he'd given her a key to his home. She could come and go at her leisure any time she wanted. Bending over the oven, Tori opened it. The aroma of food cooking filled the air with a pleasing smell. She kept her head averted from Jenny, stifling down the jealousy eating away at her heart.

"That smells good," Jenny said, leaning toward her and sniffing the air with appreciation. "I've always wanted to learn to cook, but with school and everything, I've never had the time." She continued to babble on.

Tori felt ready to scream with listening to the breathless sound. Hearing a noise in the hallway, she lifted her head and her green gaze met Casey's. A sigh slowly left her body when she saw that he was

back. For an instant, she thought she saw a look of consternation fill his blue eyes when he spotted Jenny. It disappeared as quickly as it came.

“When did you get here, Jenny?” His eyes narrowed slightly looking at his unexpected visitor.

Jenny turned and ran the length of the room, leaping into his arms. Her lips quickly covered his in a searing kiss. She wasn’t acting in the least bashful over Tori watching them.

Tori felt a new wave of jealousy shaking her insides with a jolt. She quickly turned her head away, blocking out the heart wrenching sight.

Casey separated himself from Jenny and held her at arms length. “Why didn’t you call before you came?”

“When I couldn’t get you on the phone, Casey O’Rourke, I decided you weren’t going to call me,” she scolded him lightly. “So, here I am. Aren’t you pleased to see me?” A pout covered her delicate lips.

“I’ve been busy lately,” he explained gently, sounding to Tori as if he were talking to a small child.

Tori’s brows lifted. She stole a glance at his features, wondering if she’d heard him right. He didn’t give Tori the impression he’d missed the young woman clinging tightly to his arm. Just the opposite was true. A frown of irritation lined his smooth brow, but she noticed how he kept his tone even.

“Do your parents know you left school to come here?”

“No, I didn’t tell them,” she confessed, with a light giggle. “You’re not going to call them, are you?”

He studied her features for several seconds as if coming to a decision. “I won’t call them if you promise to head back this afternoon.”

“Oh, why do I have to go?” She sounded as if she was going to cry.

“Because you don’t need to be missing so much school and I’m working on a case. I’ll make a deal with you. You can stay and eat, but you’re turning that car in the direction of your school as soon as you’ve finished. If I have to I’ll drive you there myself.”

Jenny searched his face looking for some sign of softening across his features. When she didn’t find any, she shrugged her shoulders lightly. “Okay, it’s a deal,” she finally relented.

“That sure smells good,” he uttered, his gaze moving to Tori. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was until walking in here.”

After listening to the earlier exchange between Casey and Jenny, Tori felt a lighthearted sensation filling her. She could tell that Jenny placed more importance on their relationship, than Casey. This train of thought warmed her heart. She glanced at Casey with a smile in her eyes. “As soon as the

biscuits brown, we'll eat," she murmured, walking over to the cabinet and removing the dishes to set the table.

While eating, Jenny monopolized the conversation, telling Casey what some of her classes were at college this semester. Instead of feeling jealous or irritated at the young woman, Tori listened with an indulgent smile curving her lips. Jenny Newfeld could out talk any person she'd ever met and she found her constant chatter almost amusing now that she knew the facts behind her and Casey's relationship.

After putting the last dish in the cabinet, Jenny lifted her coat from the chair. She bent to pick up her overnight case before walking across the room to where Casey stood. "I still don't know why you won't let me stay, but I guess you have your reasons," she said, reaching up to plant a kiss across his lips.

A smile filled Casey's eyes as he looked at her. "Yes, I have my reasons," he answered, again pulling himself away from her clutching arms. "I want you to drive back safely. None of that speeding."

"Oh, I'll be careful. I can't afford any more tickets. One more and the insurance company threatened to drop me."

He placed his hand on her back as he walked her to the door. He opened it for her and she turned, kissing his lips in another fleeting kiss.

Her head turned and she looked along the hallway to where Tori stood. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Tori," she said. "I'll be sure and watch your next news broadcast."

"I'm glad I had the chance to meet you, too," she answered, smiling at her.

As quickly as she'd arrived, Jenny backed her car out of the drive. With a roar of the engine, the sound soon faded into the distance as the car disappeared down the road.

He turned and looked at Tori, still standing a few feet from him. "I didn't have any idea she'd show up today. She figures she's in love with me and there's no convincing her otherwise."

"How did you meet her?" She felt curious since he had mentioned her parents earlier when he had talked to Jenny.

"I worked on a case for her parents a year ago." He moved across to the living room. She followed close behind and joined him on the couch. "At the time, Jenny was only seventeen and still in high school. When she turned eighteen, her parents enrolled her in college. Since then, she's decided she's in love with me and I don't want to hurt her feelings."

"When she first arrived, she used a door key to get in," she said thoughtfully, still unsure over how she'd gotten it.

"Her parents used my home as a safe house last year and I suppose Jenny got hold of the key they had made. I certainly didn't give her one. If you had told me earlier, I would have asked her for it back."

If she had known, she would have made sure he knew it. That was the final thing bothering her about his relationship with Jenny. "I thought you might be having a torrid affair and I'd be in the way staying here." She tried making it sound like a joke. She certainly didn't want him to know how upset she'd been when Jenny arrived on his doorstep.

"Give me credit for having more sense than that." He gave her a narrow look. "She's a school girl. Sure, I'm fond of her, but not in the way that Jenny wants."

She decided that it was time to change the subject. "Did you get everything from my apartment?"

"Yes, I'll unload the car while you're getting ready for work," he told her, standing.

"Did you find out anything more about the fire?"

"Not very much. Only that someone set it, but we knew that already. I'll be right back."

She watched him leave before walking up the stairs to her bedroom. It was Friday, she thought tiredly, and she would have the entire weekend off before starting her new assignment on homeless people.

## Chapter Eleven

Monday evening, Casey drove Tori to the slum district of New York City. This was the night she began her new series on the homeless people. She mentally braced herself for a long night ahead, but she knew Casey would be by her side, protecting her.

"Are you nervous?" His gaze drifted across to where she sat.

"Maybe a little, but you're with me." She could feel the butterflies still racing through her stomach.

"Yes, I'm here and intend to stay with you all evening," he promised, giving her a grin.

As he pulled the car over to the curb where they were to meet the camera crew, he saw car lights of an approaching vehicle in the distance. At least they wouldn't be alone for very long on the deserted street. Her gaze quickly surveyed their surroundings. The wind blew snowflakes across the dirty sidewalks, making them look a little cleaner with the white fluff gathering. Old newspapers flapped from garbage cans that had no lids. Some of the homeless must have gathered the papers to burn later to keep warm, she figured. Tori spotted an old man, lying in a doorway, trying to keep the chilly wind from reaching him.

Down the street were several people warming their hands over an open flame shooting out of an old metal can. Their clothes were ragged and dirty and she didn't miss the hopelessness lining their faces. She often wondered how a person could come to this in life, but she figured a little bad luck could put anyone in this position.

"There's the truck now," Casey spoke into the quiet.

For a moment, she hesitated about getting out, but she knew she had a job to do. She reached for the door handle and stepped out onto the sidewalk, feeling the blustery wind, cold and chilling against her bare face. She wondered silently how the street people survived night after night. If the cold didn't kill them, then starvation was waiting in line to claim them. She turned her head and walked with Casey across the street.

Mike, the cameraman, greeted her with a smile. "All set," He asked, hefting the equipment onto his shoulder as he walked. Another man followed behind him, carrying the lights and microphone.

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be." She straightened her shoulders and started to follow the equipment to the other side of the street.

Casey leaned toward her before she walked away. "Just be careful tonight," he warned her lightly. "Remember, I'll be watching and waiting in case anything goes wrong."

She nodded her head as she made her way over to the fiery barrel. Behind the men were makeshift shelters made from scraps of lumber and other types of building materials. Stopping a few feet from where three men stood, she lifted the microphone and started asking questions. At first, the men were hesitant about answering her, but eventually her soft tone of voice brought them around. She first asked what had caused them to lose a permanent place in society. Her next question was how they had wound up on the streets, without any shelter or food.

"I lost my job in the late seventies," one of the older men answered. "Because of my age, I couldn't find anyone who would hire me. My wife moved on to another city to live with her relatives until I could find something, but I haven't heard from her in years."

"Do you know where she is?" Tori asked, blinking back a tear that was threatening to fall over his sad story.

"I haven't heard a word from her in ten years," he confessed, stopping his explanation to cough. "This darn cold weather hit early."

"Yes, it has," she agreed with him. "Why don't you check out some of the shelters closer to the city? Couldn't you spend your nights in one?"

"Most of them are filled up, Miss," he told her. "You don't know how many homeless people there are in New York. What you see along this street doesn't come close to a number."

"Thanks so much for your time," she murmured as she moved along the street to talk to a woman she saw huddled in a doorway. When she finished the second interview, she glanced at her watch and noticed it was time to quit for the night. She couldn't shake the sadness that engulfed her heart over the pitiful sights she'd seen so far.

"That's a wrap," Mike called, the portable lights fading.

"Are you all right?" Casey asked, noticing the tears coating her cheeks.

"I always feel this way when I interview homeless people. It breaks my heart," she admitted. "There must be something we can do for them."

"I don't know what it could be." He shrugged his shoulders helplessly, opening the car door for her.

"What about contacting a government agency and sending them a copy of the film we're going to shoot this next week. Most of the officials tend to forget there are people living like this. Maybe, if they became aware of the growing number, they could build more shelters."

A hopeful light entered her eyes as an idea began forming. She was going to clear it with Mack before she sent any film. She hoped she could find the right government officials who might take an interest in their plight. Her gaze drifted to the lone figure of a man limping across the street. He had his head almost buried in the collar of his coat to ward off the cold wind. When he stopped to wait for them to pass, she caught a glimpse of his face and watery blue eyes staring into the warm car at her.

"Stop the car, Casey." The craggy face of the man looked so familiar and she racked her brain trying to remember where she'd seen him before. A light suddenly went off in her head remembering another place and time. The man worked as a broadcaster on a local station with her father many years ago. If she remembered the long ago, acquaintance of her father, then it had to be Ben Rathman.

"Why do you want to stop?"

"I believe I know him." She nodded her head toward the man still standing in the street.

"Come on, this isn't exactly the safest part of town to be stopping in, if you don't have to. Maybe you just think you know him."

"Please," she pleaded. "I have to find out." As she glanced across the seat, she noticed his features set in a look of resistance to her suggestion. She didn't think he was going to agree with her plan. Eventually, she began to see a softer look covering his face.

He sighed deeply and pulled the car over to the curb. When he got out, he waited for her. "If it does happen to be the man you know, what's his name?" He asked, his breath coming out in puffs of white frost.

"Ben Rathman. My father used to anchor with someone that looks a lot like him."

He turned his head and shouted, "Are you Ben Rathman?"

The man stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Yeah, that's me," he answered in a hoarse tone

"I believe you've found your Ben Rathman," he said, grinning at her as he eyed the warmth filling her eyes. "Come on and we'll talk to him."



She hurried across the street and stopped beneath a streetlight where Ben stood. She studied his unkempt condition, remembering how he'd always appeared fresh and clean when he came to their home. Sadness seized her heart seeing how he had changed in just a few short years. "Ben," she said softly. "It's Tori."

"Well, I'll be," he grinned at her. "If it isn't little Tori Connors. How is your dad? I haven't seen him for some time now."

It dawned on Tori how out of touch Ben was with the world. He hadn't heard about her father. "Dad was killed last year," she told him, noticing the stricken look filling his eyes.

"I'm sorry, honey," he mumbled in a shaken voice, his eyes looking even more watery after hearing her news. "He was a good guy and I'll never forget him."

"Thanks," she murmured. "How have you been?"

"Down on my luck lately, but I have a few prospects for a job. I'm sure I'll get back in the business."

"Do you need any money until you get on your feet?"

"I don't want you giving me your money," he told her proudly. "Why don't we call it a loan?"

"All right, we'll call it a loan." She pushed several twenties into his red-roughened hands. "You take care and I'll see you later." She knew the phrase was only a figure of speech. How would she ever find Ben Rathman again in a city of this size? Before turning away, he lifted his hand and waved to her. She stood watching until she felt Casey's hand on her arm, urging her toward the car.

"We should be going," he told her gently. "Let's stop for something to eat."

"I don't feel very hungry, but I'll stop with you."

"Okay," he said.

She knew he had made the right decision in offering to stop for something to eat. Once the wine arrived at the table and she drank a glass, she found herself in a more relaxed mood. It didn't take her long to order dinner.

Much later, as they were leaving the restaurant, Casey smiled at her. "For someone who wasn't hungry, you sure did a good job on that steak. I'd hate to see what you'd eat if you were starving." His chuckle brought a grin to her face.

"Drinking wine always makes me hungry," she admitted, with a laugh.

"Excuses, excuses," he uttered playfully.

On the ride home, she felt some of her depression fading over what she saw on the street that night. She had made up her mind earlier to do more for the homeless and had made a start tonight with Ben Rathman. This gave her heart a much-needed lift. When they reached his home, she yawned sleepily from the effects of the food and alcohol. "I don't want to be a party pooper, but I'm going to have an early night."

"Go ahead," he told her, standing and walking through the hallway with her. As they reached the stairs, he placed his hands on her shoulders. "Sleep well." Bending his head, his lips covered hers. The kiss was short, but she felt its lingering effects as she undressed and crawled into bed.

Lying beneath the cover, she wondered how she could leave him once he caught her stalker. She knew deep down that he would eventually catch him. Right then, she didn't want to think those thoughts. They were too painful. Before drifting off to sleep, she heard the light footsteps outside her door. She knew he was making his way to his bedroom near hers. A smile of contentment lined her features as her eyes closed in sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The following night she finished all but one interview. They traveled to a different section of the city, some miles away from their previous location. In her opinion, this area looked more seedy and rundown than the one they'd visited the night before. She approached an older woman, standing alone on a street corner. The woman looked at her warily, but she didn't offer to run into hiding. Tori didn't miss how unkempt she looked. The tattered coat had missing buttons, with the front held together with safety pins. She wore a scarf across her head, dotted with holes. Her shoes looked old and worn. As she started the interview, she could feel her heart reaching out to the woman. She began asking questions and didn't pay attention to her surroundings. The man approaching her caught her unaware.

Feeling someone behind her, she turned and glanced at him. He wore an expensive looking, dark overcoat, with the collar pulled up to hide his face. A hat with a wide brim helped in keeping his identity a secret. All she could see were dark eyes glaring at her. As he made a lunging motion toward her, she saw a black object in his hand. She couldn't move. This had to be the same man that caused her so many problems in the last few weeks.

His hands reached for her. When he gripped her shoulders in a tight hold, his biting fingers brought pains shooting through her arms. The frightening episode could only have taken seconds. She felt her attacker wrestled away from her to the ground. Staring with shocked eyes, she saw the man lifting the black object and striking Casey alongside the head. The blow stunned Casey for several seconds, allowing the stranger time to get to his feet and escape.

"Casey!" Tori cried, leaning toward him. "Are you all right?"

Without answering her, he jumped up and ran off toward the alley where the man disappeared. She couldn't hide the panic seizing her. What if something happened to Casey in the dark alley? She would

never forgive herself if anything happened to him. She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath, until she saw Casey's lone figure walking down the street toward her.

Mike, along with Tori stood watching in a helpless silence. When Casey walked over to them, she noticed blood coating the side of his face.

"You never did tell me if you're all right," she uttered in a shaky whisper, a look of anxiety covering her features.

"It would take more than what he did to hurt me," he admitted in a hard tone.

"Who was that guy?" Mike asked.

"I didn't get a good look at him, but you must have him on film," he answered, removing a handkerchief and wiping away the blood.

"I did, but he never did show his face." Mike shrugged his shoulders. "His back was to me the entire time."

"Yeah, that's all I saw, too," he said in irritation. "Did you get a good look at him, Tori?"

"It was so dark and, like Mike said, he had his face covered." In the excitement, she forgot her interview with the woman. The street was empty now. She figured the woman became scarce at the first sign of trouble.

"Don't you think you ought to get that checked out," Mike suggested "You took a hard knock."

"No, it doesn't feel too bad." He reached up and rubbed his fingers across the slight cut with the hard knot. "Will you do something for me, Mike?"

"If I can," he answered.

"Don't tell anyone about this incident. As soon as you develop the film, I'd like a copy. Maybe I can figure out who he was."

"Will do, Casey"

"I think we're finished for now," Casey said. "We've got a few more days to film, so Tori should be able to make up for what she missed tonight."

"I agree with you." Mike had already started to pull the cover over his camera. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

She waved to Mike and followed Casey over to the car. She felt all shaky inside, but one good thought came to her. Casey had been there when she needed him and that was all that mattered to her.

\* \* \* \*

The next three nights passed swiftly, winding up the segment on the homeless. Everything went more smoothly after the second night. She felt grateful as she sat alongside Casey in the car on Friday evening heading for home.

After driving several miles in silence, she found him looking across at her. "We're going to fly to Chicago tomorrow," he told her.

"Why are we going there?"

"I want to meet with my associate and get the rest of the reports from him. We're leaving the house at eight in the morning. I've booked us a flight for ten."

She felt excited over the trip he offered her. She needed a break from the hectic schedule of last week, and this would be the perfect opportunity to take advantage of some relaxation.

"Don't forget to pack something to wear out to dinner and dancing," he suggested, pulling into the yard and parking.

"I'm looking forward to a weekend away from the city," she murmured, following him into the house and going straight to her room to begin packing for the next day.

## Chapter Twelve

The snow stopped falling by Saturday evening. On Sunday afternoon, he headed his car in the direction of the airport. The traffic wasn't too heavy. They reached the terminal for their flight to Chicago, with time to spare. When they settled in the plane, she turned to him. "Who is this contact in Chicago?"

"He was an agent at one time, the same as me. After I gave my notice to the agency, he gave his, too. We were partners."

"Oh" She figured they must have a lucrative partnership to have offices in both New York and Chicago, but he didn't explain any more to her.

Another question puzzled her over his relationship with Mack. "How well do you know Mack?"

"I met him two years ago, while I was working a case. Before getting the call from him about you, there was very little I knew of his past."

"Mack's always been fair to me. I think of him as a father figure."

She lapsed into silence as an announcement came over the speaker naming the movie showing that night. Her gaze drifted down the aisle and stopped instantly. Josh Kennedy looked her way and a smile

lit his face. He continued walking toward her and Casey's seat. She looked at Casey and then at Josh, mentally comparing the two men. Josh looked boyish, compared to Casey's rough look. She silently wondered how she could have thought she was in love with him. As she smiled a greeting, she couldn't remember what she'd found so exciting about him.

"Tori," Josh greeted her, and Casey's head lifted "Fancy meeting you here. What have you been doing lately?"

"Working," she answered, her gaze drifting to Casey. "Casey, this is a friend of mine, Josh Kennedy." She made the introductions. As she said the word friend, she noticed a frown settling across Josh's brow.

He reached out and shook Casey's hand. "I thought we were more than friend's at one time. Just the other day, I decided to call you to see if you might want to go out again."

"Sorry, I've been too busy lately," she answered, noticing the dejected look swiftly covering his features over her lack of interest.

"Now that I think back, that was the main problem with our relationship. You were always too busy with your career," he uttered petulantly. "I see things haven't changed."

She studied his face realizing that Josh Kennedy didn't take rejection too lightly. It had been all right for him to end their relationship when it suited him. When the lights dimmed for the start of the movie, Josh gave her a frowning look. "I'll call you sometime," he promised, before making his way back to his seat.

"An old flame?" Casey asked casually. His softly worded question didn't hide the unrest in his voice as he gave her a sidelong glance. His gaze narrowed slightly, waiting for her answer.

"I dated Josh for a while, but he never took our relationship seriously," she explained. "Now that I look back, I can see he was too self-centered."

"He could be the one causing you all your problems," he said, his gaze resting on her. "How did he take the news of the breakup?"

"Josh suggested it, but he did try calling me later. When he left messages on the answering machine, I never returned his calls." She didn't explain to him that the hurt went deep for her then. At the time, she'd felt tempted to pick up the phone and talk to him, but her pride stopped her from making a complete fool of herself.

"He didn't appear too happy about your dedication to your career."

"Maybe not, but you can see how childish he is." She decided to dismiss Josh Kennedy from her thoughts. He didn't warrant the time it would take for her to figure out if he was happy, or unhappy at finding she didn't want him anymore. When the movie came on the screen, she relaxed and placed the

earphones on. She became interested in the dramatic movie unfolding before her and forgot all about Josh Kennedy.

\* \* \* \*

The plane banked low over the airport in Chicago late that evening. A steady, drizzling rain fell and an occasional streak of lightning filled the atmosphere. She glanced down at the lights on the runway. At least it wasn't snowing in Chicago as it was in New York, she thought silently. Minutes passed before she felt the giant aircraft touch down. After landing, Casey and Tori gathered their luggage and hailed a cab. Soon the cab headed across the busy city in the direction of the hotel. On the ride along Lake Shore Drive, she glanced at the beauty of the Chicago skyline. The lighted buildings gleamed in the dark night, casting a shadowy reflection into the water on Lake Michigan.

This was her first trip to the windy city and she wondered if it looked as clean in the daylight as it did at night. The one thing she did notice was how much traffic filled the highways—the same as New York. She brought her wandering thoughts back to the present as the cab pulled beneath a concrete portico, jutting out from the hotel entrance. She got out and stood waiting for Casey to collect their luggage.

When they checked in at the desk, the bellhop led the way to an elevator and waited to load on the luggage. The man reached their suite of rooms and unlocked the door. There were two bedrooms, with a small kitchen and a tiny living room. It looked like a small apartment to her. Tori moved out of the way until the bellhop placed their luggage in the living room.

After giving him a tip, Casey closed the door behind the man and locked it.

"I'm going to take a shower," she told him when he returned to the living room.

"Are you hungry? We could call room service."

"No, but if you are, go ahead." She made her way into her bedroom. She opened the bathroom door and stepped inside. She took her clothing off, placing them on a chair near the vanity. Standing under the warm spray, her thoughts were on what they were planning to do the following evening. Excitement tingled through her at the thought of sharing a romantic dinner and then dancing with Casey. She had noticed in the last few days, how he had avoided any intimacy with her. Maybe he was feeling tired of her already. She'd always given herself so freely to him.

Removing a towel, she wrapped it sarong fashion around her and padded softly into her bedroom. The overhead light was off, with only one lamp casting a muted glow from the dresser. She hadn't made a sound as she entered and raised her head to look across the room. She stopped near the doorway by the sight she saw. And that was Casey's muscular body stretched out on the bed minus any clothing. She didn't look away, devouring every inch of him.

He lifted his head and his gaze met hers. So much, for her believing he may have tired of her. His look sent out the silent message that she wanted to see. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. Slowly, she dropped the towel, baring her body. She walked with a sensuous grace over to the bed. Sliding

onto the soft sheet alongside him, her hands ran the length of his body until reaching his chest. She then brought her hands again to his thighs, letting them linger across his raised cock. A shudder swiftly passed through his body at her arousing tactics. Lowering her head, she captured his dick between her lips. She glided her lips softly across his hard penis. She could feel his body beginning to shake in excitement. She wasn't ready to stop, but he had other plans as he reached for her.

He leaned on his elbow above her, his mouth reaching for her raised nipple. Nibbling gently, she responded heatedly. He moved to the other breast and his lips greedily suckled the nipple until it was rock hard. His mouth moved away from her breasts. When his tongue made passing licks across her body, the tremors set in for Tori. He made his way down her smooth body until reaching her pussy waiting for his approaching tongue. As he captured her clitoris, she couldn't stop the uncontrollable movements of her body. She could feel how he kept sucking on her meaty clit until she felt a climax flowing through her.

Tori pulled his face toward her lips, capturing them and tasting the juice of her pussy that still covered them. She wanted him to enjoy the moment as much as she did and pressed him backward so that she could climb on top. When she straddled his muscular body, she pushed against his cock and felt it filling her waiting cavity. She began riding his hard penis with swift strokes until she heard him groan out her name. She couldn't hold out any longer as she felt juice flowing from her and coating his penis. The climax filled her body and she shuddered with its intensity. It wasn't long before she felt his reaction to her lovemaking. He filled her pussy with the white hot cum and she shuddered again loving every second.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, she lay saturated in his arms as a blissful feeling washed over her. Just on, the point of falling asleep, she moved to get more comfortable, but the iron band of his arm reached out pulling her snugly against him. It didn't look as if he was ready to let her move an inch from his heated body. She fell into a contented sleep, experiencing the continued sensation of warmth from his body heat. Sometime, during the night, Casey moaned in his sleep, waking Tori instantly.

## Chapter Thirteen

"No, no!" he grated in a rough tone, thrashing around the wide bed.

"Casey," she murmured gently, "what's wrong?" He looked at her and she thought she saw fear filling his eyes.

"I'm sorry, I woke you," he apologized. "I must have had a bad dream."

She felt him reaching for her again and tucking her next to his warm body. He held her so tightly that she moved slightly trying to get more comfortable. Tori knew he discovered what he was doing and loosened his grip.

The following morning Casey awoke alone in bed. He got up and headed for the shower. After dressing, he walked into the living room looking for Tori. Just then, the door opened. In walked Tori. She smiled a greeting, but it faded as she saw the look of frustration covering his face. "Where in the hell have you been?" He asked, in a raspy tone.

"I went down to the lobby and bought a newspaper."

"From now on, tell me where you're going," he said in a more calm tone after seeing the confusion on her face. "I thought someone had broken into the apartment and taken you with them."

"I'm sorry, I would have told you, but you were sleeping." She placed the newspaper on the coffee table.

"When I leave today, lock the door behind me. Don't let anyone in, unless it's me."

"I could go with you." She glanced at his dark face. Studying his expression, she knew he'd already made up his mind for her to stay at the hotel.

"It shouldn't take me over an hour to get back. You'll be safe here for that long."

She nodded as she watched him pulling on his jacket. "Don't you want to eat before you leave?" She watched as he walked to the door.

"Maybe later, we can call room service. Make sure you lock it behind me."

As soon as he disappeared into the elevator, she clicked the lock in place. Wandering into her bedroom, the events of last night entered her thoughts. He never did tell her what was wrong when he'd had the nightmare. All through the night, he'd held her next to him protectively. Picking up the paper, she leafed through the sections reading the social page first. She then turned toward the personal column in the back of the newspaper. Always in the past, she'd enjoyed reading this section of the paper.

When she reached the second column, she couldn't believe what she saw. The advertisement jumped out at her. It stated that Tori Connors would never live to see twenty-five. It also went on to read that if she knew what was good for her, she'd get out of the broadcasting business. She smothered the cry ready to escape her lips. Looking at the article again, an idea popped into her head. What if she called the newspaper and found out who had placed the advertisement? Surely, someone was paying for it.

She picked up the phone, getting an outside line from the desk clerk. After asking information for the paper's number, she dialed it with trembling fingers. When she eventually heard someone answering, her voice almost deserted her, but she pushed the fear aside. "I'm calling about the advertisement in your personal column today," she explained to the woman answering her call. "I'd like to know about add number seven in the second section of the personal column. Could you tell me who placed it?"

"Hold on a minute and I'll check."



She tapped her fingers across the wooden surface of the end table impatiently. Seconds ticked by, seeming almost as if it was an eternity, but soon she heard the woman picking up the phone again.

"Hello, are you still there?"

"Yes," Tori answered.

"Are you talking about the one that reads Tori Connors will never live to see twenty-five?" A strange tone sounded in her voice. "The person placing this advertisement sent the notice by overnight mail with cash enclosed."

"Do you know what city it came from?" She tried to hide the urgency in her tone.

"Let me see. Yes, I have it here. It's New York City, but there wasn't a street address of the person sending it enclosed. The only other information I have is that the courier is Overnight Mail, located on Fifth Street." A few seconds of silence followed, but soon the woman's voice came over the line again. "Are you Tori?"

"Yes."

"I thought so by listening to you." She sighed heavily. "If it was me, I'd contact the police immediately. It sounds as if this person means business."

"I have already, and thanks for all your help." She slowly replaced the receiver and sat staring at the silent phone. At least she knew her stalker was still in New York City. But, how did he know she'd be in Chicago today? The puzzling thoughts kept running through her head, until she felt an ache beginning to develop along her temples. When a knock sounded on the door, she jumped in alarm. Walking over to it, she waited until she heard the knock again "Is that you, Casey?" She asked tremulously.

"Yes."

Tori quickly unlocked the door and rushed into his arms, almost knocking the folder from his hands.

"What's wrong?"

She moved out of his embrace and over to the newspaper. "This," she said, handing him the folded section on the personal column.

"Damn," he muttered an oath after reading it. An angry flush covered his face as he tossed it aside and took her back in his arms. "It's going to be all right, I'll not let anything happen to you."

"I called the newspaper, but they couldn't help me. Whoever put this in the paper, paid with cash to Overnight Mail, located on Fifth Avenue in New York City." Tori watched as he picked up the phone and asked for information. He was trying to find the number of the express mail company. It didn't take long before he scribbled a number on a piece of paper. She saw that he dialed the phone again and waited impatiently for someone to answer.

On the tenth ring, he replaced the receiver and turned to Tori. "The courier isn't open today, but I'm going to stop in there after we reach New York."

"I don't know what we'll find out, since it looks as if they've covered everything carefully. Even down to leaving their return address out."

"Let's forget all this and enjoy ourselves while we're here," he soothed her gently. "I've made reservations at one of the restaurants in town, and from there, we're going dancing." She had a wary expression lining her face. "You can stop worrying. No one knows we're staying here. That's why they had to put the warning in the newspaper."

"I suppose you're right."

"We'll call room service and have something delivered for lunch," he suggested. "I'm starving." A grin spread across his face and she felt her spirits suddenly lifting.

\* \* \* \*

True to his word, his reservations were at one of the choice restaurants in the city. When they arrived, he ordered a bottle of champagne and the waiter brought it to their table in an iced bucket. The liquid tickled her nose when she lifted her glass to drink. After the second glass, she began to relax letting her problems float away. Several times during dinner, she caught his blue gaze watching her with a glowing look across the candle-lit table. He couldn't have picked a more romantic spot for dinner. A group of musicians, playing violins, walked over to where they sat and played love ballads throughout their stay.

After leaving the restaurant, he walked her through to the nightclub attached to the restaurant. For hours, they danced to almost every tune the band played. She felt special as he held her gently to him and hummed the different songs in her ear. This was what she needed to bolster her courage to face the coming weeks ahead in finding her stalker. It was very late when they returned to the hotel. That night, they again used her bedroom, lying snuggled together in each other's arms. It seemed almost natural for her to have him so close. Not one time did he make any overtures of sex, only wanting to feel that she was safe in his arms. She didn't give it a second thought as she sighed contentedly and pulled his arm more snugly around her waist.

## Chapter Fourteen

She felt sad when their plane touched down in New York City again. She hadn't wanted their private time together to end so suddenly. Except for the newspaper advertisement, she had felt safer than she had in a long while. Now, she was back in the city where anything could happen to her. The only thing keeping her from harm was Casey. She glanced at his strong profile as they walked through the airport terminal and felt her love growing by the second. She'd never felt such an overpowering sensation before for anyone.

As he promised, he drove straight to the address of the Overnight Mail Company that delivered the warning message to the newspaper. When he drew the car over to the curb, she started to get out. He stopped her. "Wait here. It should only take a few minutes to get the information I want."

She nodded her head as he got out of the car. Reaching over, she locked the door and watched until he disappeared into the building. His few minutes stretched into twenty. She began to worry over what was taking him so long. Just as she decided to go into the building and find him, he came walking out of the building. "What did you find out?"

"Not a whole lot," he answered vaguely. "The woman who took the advertisement was a new worker and didn't pay too much attention to the man placing it. Her supervisor wasn't too happy with her when he found out the contents of the advertisement."

"Another dead-end, I suppose," she sighed listening to his information.

"Just another stumbling block we have to overcome," he reassured her.

"Maybe something else will turn up," she answered, feeling the tension rising in her again.

"Do you think you should check in at the studio before we go home? I'm sure Mack is expecting you to go on tonight."

"I suppose I should." For the first time, she wasn't really looking forward to it. Always in the past, she'd lived and breathed for her work. Since meeting Casey, her job had taken second place in her thoughts. She could give her lucrative career up at a moment's notice, if he would only say the right words to her.

After they pulled away from the curb, he started the drive toward the studio. The traffic was lighter for this time of day, and it didn't take long before he pulled onto the parking lot. He opened the door and walked with her into the back entrance. They had to pass Mack's office on the way in, and she turned her head and glanced inside.

Mack and Scot were in his office, having what looked like a serious discussion. Maybe Scot thought she'd be gone longer and was preparing for the night ahead. When he lifted his head and saw her, a strange expression covered his face. She couldn't tell whether it was a worried look, or a look of irritation.

Mack glanced up and motioned for them to come in. Casey placed his hand on her back and guided her inside.

"I saw you're coverage on the homeless people today," Mack told her. "You didn't have any problems doing the story, other than getting people to talk to you, did you?"

What kind of question was that for Mack to be asking? She wondered silently. It was almost as if he knew something had happened and wanted her to confirm it. "No, I didn't have any problems," she answered, watching how his gaze continued to study her face.

"You did a wonderful job," he eventually told her, his gaze drifting to Scot as he spoke.

She thought she saw a flash of anger filling Mack's gaze as he looked at the other man, but she figured it could be her imagination. "Thanks, Mack," she said, accepting his compliment. "I'd like to take the film and show it to several government officials. Maybe this will jog their memories into thinking about the plight of the homeless."

"That's a wonderful idea. We should have thought of doing that a long time ago, but I suppose we all forget."

"You won't have to go on tonight, Scot," Mack told Scot who still stood hovering next to the desk, taking in the conversation flowing around him. "Tori can take over."

Scot's features turned red over Mack's statement. He looked ready to explode. "I thought we already talked about that this morning," he spoke up, trying to keep his tone level, but it was almost impossible with the seething anger filling him. "We even discussed the news segment I was going to do for this evening."

Mack's features changed to a helpless expression as he glanced at Tori. It looked like Mack was sending her a silent plea. Maybe she was reading too much into his look, but she didn't think so.

"He can take my place tonight." She noticed the relieved look suddenly covering Mack's lined face and knew she'd been right all along. "I'm a little tired after our trip."

"If you're sure you won't mind?" He quickly asked.

"No."

"Okay, you're on tonight, Scot," he said. "Give these to Dominic when he gets here." He handed Scot a manila folder with the news segments for that night. "Well, how did your trip go?" Mack asked curiously, looking at Casey for the information, instead of Tori.

She thought his actions peculiar, but she kept quiet listening to the conversation.

"Nothing unexpected happened," Casey answered, refusing to elaborate on the specifics of their trip, or the message Tori had spotted in the newspaper column.

"Did you get all of your business taken care of in Chicago?" Casey's vague answer didn't put him off. He continued to watch Casey with a narrow look waiting.

"Everything that needed to be done," he answered, glancing from Mack over to Tori. "I'll wait here while you get what you need to take home."

She nodded her head and got up. Now, he had her confused. She didn't need to take anything with her. He probably just wanted some time alone to talk to Mack.

"I'm going to drop over to see Joan," she said as she moved to the door. She walked toward the room where Joan always applied her makeup for the broadcast. When she rounded the corner and entered the door, she saw Joan waiting for her.

"I didn't think you were going to make it for tonight," her friend greeted her. "How was your trip?"

"We had a good time," she said, claiming a chair. When she saw the other woman getting up to begin preparing to put on her makeup, Tori stopped her. "I get tonight off. Scot's going to go on in my place."

"Oh, how come?"

"Mack asked if I minded him taking my place for one more night and I told him, I didn't." Tori shrugged her shoulders. Again, the feeling that she didn't mind missing the broadcasting business entered her thoughts. She'd had similar thoughts while they were on the trip and they hadn't changed.

"I never could warm up to Scot," Joan said in a lowered tone. "He's so pushy. I wonder why Mack even keeps him on at the studio."

"He might just be a good friend to Scot."

"Still, there's something about him that makes my skin crawl, especially when I do his makeup for the show. He has such beady eyes, watching everything that's going on." She gave a mock shudder at the thought.

"Now you're being melodramatic." Her laugh rang out and caused Joan to giggle as she thought over her description of Scot Carter.

"Enough about Scot, what did you and that dream man do all weekend?"

"He picked a very romantic place for dinner. Men playing violins serenaded us while we ate. Afterwards, we danced until the wee hours of the morning." A dreamy look covered her face as she talked.

"I hate to be the one to tell you, but you're in love," she smiled across at her.

"Is it that obvious?" She returned her smile, but her face still had the same expression as it had moment's ago.

"Anyone would be blind not to see it."

"I hope Casey doesn't suspect."

"Why, you're going with him, aren't you?" Joan asked in a quizzical tone

"Yes, but he hasn't said anything about caring for me yet," she murmured, remembering instantly why she was with him. He was her bodyguard, nothing more. She couldn't tell Joan, because no one, except Mack, knew why she and Casey spent so much time together. "I don't want Casey to think I'm rushing him into anything. Sometimes, a man will bolt if they're pushed in a corner."

"You may be right, but good luck anyway," she said just as Casey peered around the doorway.

He nodded his head to Joan. "Are you ready to leave, Tori?"

"All set," she answered, gathering her purse and standing. "I'll see you tomorrow night, Joan, unless something else comes up and Scot has to take my place."

"I hope he doesn't have to," she whispered softly.

She waved to Joan as they walked from the room.

As they reached his car parked in the lot, he opened her door for her. He walked around the car and joined her. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting so long," he apologized, glancing across at her.

"Joan and I had a chance to catch up on our nightly gossip session," she answered in a joking tone.

"I checked out Mike's film from Tuesday night. He saved the unedited part for me to view, but no one else has seen it."

"Was it any help in identifying the man?" She glanced across at him, waiting almost impatiently for his answer. This would solve all her problems.

"Not really," he answered, hedging with the truth a bit. He turned the car off on the exit leading to her apartment. Glancing over, she gave him an inquisitive look. "Since we were away all weekend, we need to check your answering machine," he explained what he was doing. "It should only take me a few minutes."

She nodded her head as he pulled to the back entrance "I'll walk up with you," she said, starting to open her door.

"No, wait here. I'll be right out."

"Okay," she said, reaching over to lock his door when he got out.

It wasn't long before she saw him walking toward the car from the front of the building. A frown lined his face as he got in. She wondered what he'd found in her apartment when he got there. "Was everything all right inside?" She held her breath waiting for his answer.

"Yes."

"Why are you frowning then?"

"I was trying to decide something," he answered evasively, changing the subject. "There's something I want to discuss with you."

"What is it?" She gave him a curious look.

"When you go in to work tomorrow evening, I'm going to drop a few hints to everyone at the studio the location of the cabin."

"Why would you want to do that?" A concerned look replaced the curious look of moment's ago.

"I'm going to try to set a trap, but I don't know if you want to go along with it," he said in a lowered tone, his narrow gaze watching her features.

"I'm listening to any suggestions that you have," she murmured bravely, when all the time her stomach felt knotted in fear at his words.

"If your stalker works at the station, he'll know exactly where to find you. Tomorrow evening, after you've finished work, I'm going to drop you off at the cabin and park to get a clear view of the entrance," he continued with his explanation. "Since there's only one road for access, I can see whose driving in. He'll think you're alone if he doesn't see my car. We'll make sure all the lights are on inside. It will be like an open invitation to anyone waiting outside."

She didn't know what to say. She felt a lump in her throat, making speaking almost impossible. He proposed the plan to use her as bait for her stalker. She felt the fear coursing through her at the thought.

"You don't have to do this, if you're afraid," he told her, glancing at her white face. "I know this is a big thing I'm asking you to do, so if you refuse, I'll understand."

It was moment's before she said anything. His plan didn't set too well with her, but how else could they catch the person doing this? She had no other option, but to go along with it. "I'll do it," she eventually murmured in a strained tone. "This is a last resort plan, isn't it?" She already knew without Casey putting it into words.

"Yes," he agreed, turning down the access road leading to his cabin. "Be sure of one thing. I'm never going to let anything happen to you, I promise you that."

His words brought a little reassurance back to her. She knew that he would do everything in his power to keep her safe from harm. "I know you will, and I trust you," she answered softly as he stopped the car.

"Why don't we forget everything tonight, except cooking a special dinner," he suggested, reaching over to graze her lips with a soft kiss. "We can use some of those nutritional foods you put in the cart at the supermarket."

"That's a deal," she said, with a soft laugh, remembering how she'd forced him to buy the vegetables and not the chips. She suddenly felt some of the tension leaving her. The thought of spending a quiet evening with him appealed to her.

When they walked inside, he removed his coat and switched on all the lights. The house felt safe and cozy to her, but tomorrow night would be the testing time. The place she'd come to know as a safe haven could soon change into a house of horror, and she didn't know if she could handle the results of what might happen.

She deliberately blocked the thoughts from her mind as she joined him in the kitchen and began removing the food from the refrigerator. Tomorrow night would come soon enough for her.

## Chapter Fifteen

The following morning she awoke and her first thoughts drifted to what could lay ahead of her in the next twenty-four hours. In her mind, she still tried to cope with his plan for that evening. Dropping subtle little hints at the studio of where he lived and how far it was from the city, made her feel all tense inside. When he had suggested his idea, she had eventually agreed, but with a feeling of reluctance. Pushing the cover aside, she stretched her arms high above her head as the bedroom door opened. Her gaze drifted across the room to Casey as he entered.

He walked into the room balancing a long tray filled with food. A small vase of flowers dominated the center of the tray, filled with the remaining colorful blooms that were still alive after the first snowfall. She remembered looking at them yesterday and thought how the cold weather would soon kill them off. She felt a lump fill her throat over his thoughtful gesture. The bouquet of flowers added that extra touch of intimacy. She felt a romantic sensation winging its way through her. "What have you cooked up?" She could see the plates filled with pancakes, bacon, and eggs.

"We're going to have breakfast in bed," he answered, placing the tray across the firm mattress and crawling in beside her.

Her gaze slowly slid across the springy hair on his chest, looking damp from having just showered. She felt the familiar sensations of excitement stirring in her stomach at the sight and placed her hand across it to stop the fluttering movements. No matter how many times she saw him like this, he could always cause her senses to stir. "I've never had anyone do this for me before," she murmured softly, her eyes meeting his.

"Never?" He asked curiously. "What about Josh Kennedy?"

"Our relationship was more of a friendship, than romantic."

"Oh," he murmured thoughtfully, lifting his fork and biting into his food. "I have a surprise planned for today."

"What is it?"



"I'm taking you to visit my sister and nephew."

"What's your sister's name and how old is she?" The questions tumbled out of her before she could stop them. "This is the first time you've ever mentioned you had any relatives."

"Yes, I guess it is." He shrugged his shoulders. "Carol's twenty-five and Ryan's a little four year old bundle of dynamite. When I talked to her, she said she'd be expecting us about ten."

"Is she like you?" Her question made him stop and think for a second.

"No, I believe we're just the opposite in our personalities. Carol is easygoing, where I'm always doing something. I'm sure you'll like her and I know she'll like you."

"We should hurry if we want to make it by ten," she said anxiously, her excitement over meeting his sister and nephew showing in the bright color of her eyes.

"It's only eight o'clock. We have plenty of time to eat and get ready," he grinned at her.

"I always wanted a sister or brother. I envy you."

"You can have a houseful of kids to make up for not having a sister or brother."

"I'd like to." She'd love to have kids by Casey. But she quickly wiped the thoughts from her mind. Theirs was only a short-term arrangement, with no lasting effects.

By nine, they were on the highway headed toward Carol's home. With each mile, she couldn't contain the curiosity she felt over Casey finally telling her that he had a sister. He'd had plenty of opportunity to mention her, but for some reason, he had waited until now. When he pulled the car onto a street filled with expensive looking homes and neatly kept yards, she tried conjuring up a picture in her mind of what Carol would look like. Maybe she looked like the picture of his mother she saw on the first night she'd visited his home. He took after his father, with his dark, handsome features. She would just have to contain her curiosity and wait until they got there.

Soon, he turned the car into a long drive and parked near a two-story home with an attached garage. Sounding his horn, she watched the front door opening and a woman with dark hair running out to meet them. She carried a little boy on her hip, bouncing him back and forth.

As she drew closer, she saw how much she resembled Casey. The only difference was that she had a more feminine look, without the hard angles lining Casey's face. The little boy had sandy colored hair and didn't look at all like his mother.

"Oh, Casey, how come you waited so long to visit?" Carol greeted him, placing her son to stand near her and going into her brother's arms. "You promised me you'd come last month, so what's your excuse this time?" She brushed his cheek with a soft kiss, holding his face between her fingers. Carol's blue gaze drifted over to where Tori stood hovering in the background. "Oh, where are my manners?"

I'm Carol, Casey's little sister." She reached out and grasped Tori's hand warmly. "You certainly look familiar." A curious frown settled across her face.

"You've probably seen Tori on the nightly news show," Casey answered, reaching down to lift his nephew into his arms. "She works at KLTN Station as a news broadcaster."

"That's it," she said, her gaze brightening. "I like the idea of meeting a celebrity. How do you know my brother?"

The words flowed from her nonstop. Tori could see the difference in sister and brother right from the start Casey had little to say, where Carol blurted out any thought that popped into her head.

"Actually, I met Casey at the studio where I work," Tori hedged the truth a bit, her gaze drifting to him. "He came in one evening to visit Mack McPherson, my supervisor, and we hit it off."

"You're going to have to tell me how you latched onto this confirmed bachelor," Carol stated, her gaze drifting to Casey. Taking Tori's hand, she led the way up the front walk toward the entrance to the house.

Tori glanced over her shoulder and her gaze met Casey's. She didn't miss the twinkle lighting their blue depths. If he was angry over his sister's wording, Tori couldn't tell it by his expression.

"Come on, Champ," Casey said to Ryan, ruffling the small boy's hair. "They're going to leave us behind in the cold if we don't hurry."

When Tori entered behind Carol, her eyes surveyed the room. The interior looked beautiful to Tori, decorated in beige, with traces of orange complementing the color scheme. A gray stone fireplace shot sparks up the chimney, filling the room with cozy warmth. "Your home is beautiful," Tori remarked, standing just inside the living room.

"Come on in and sit down," Carol invited, patting a place on the couch near her.

Tori watched Casey claim a chair across from them, with Ryan still perched on his lap. From Tori's point of view, she could tell that Casey enjoyed every moment with his nephew. He had never mentioned liking children to her, but there was a special bond between these two.

"We can't stay too long," Casey spoke up.

"Why can't you visit for a while? I'd already planned our menu for dinner tonight," his sister said hopefully. "It gets so lonely with Jack gone so much." A wistful sigh escaped her lips. "The only conversation I have is from a four year old."

"Since Tori will be working this evening, we'll skip supper." A disappointed look filled Carol's face. "How about letting me take you all to lunch?"

Carol gave him a cheeky grin. "That's what I've been waiting to hear," she laughed easily. "It won't take me long to get ready. I've already bathed Ryan, so all I have to do is change his clothes."

Before too much time passed, they heard a noise on the staircase. Carol walked into the living room, dressed in a comfortable looking slack suit. She held Ryan's hand as they waited until Casey and Tori joined them near the door.

"I like your little surprises, big brother," Carol told him, waiting as he locked the door behind them.

After driving several miles, Casey parked the car at the local neighborhood pizza. While they ate, Carol talked about anything and everything, including Tori in the conversation. Tori did notice that Carol didn't mention their parents. It seemed as if it was a taboo subject between the other two. She figured the circumstances surrounding their deaths were still too painful to discuss. After finishing the meal, Tori found herself sitting next to Casey in the front seat and Carol in the back with her small son.

"When are you going to stop in again?" Carol asked, pushing her head forward to get a better look at Casey.

"Why don't we wait until Jack gets home and we'll all go out to dinner," he suggested. "You can get a babysitter, can't you?"

"Sure, and I'll make sure I call you the minute Jack gets back from his trip. You'll be going, won't you, Tori?"

Tori didn't know what to say. By that time, he may have already caught who was stalking her and taken on another case. She didn't know if he would take the time to see her then. She didn't say anything for several seconds, feeling his look landing on her.

"Of course, she'll go," he answered for her, reaching out to cover her hand with his. "We may even take you women dancing afterwards, but I have to check with Jack first." A joking light filled his eyes.

"Jack will agree with the idea. He'll have to answer to me if he doesn't."

"Then it's a date," Casey said as he pulled into Carol's drive and parked. "Don't forget to call as soon as he gets back."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the cabin for now, but try the number at the apartment if you can't reach me there," he told her, getting out and lifting Ryan from his car seat.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Tori," Carol told her, leaning her head in the car window.

"The same here," Tori answered. She had only just met her, but Carol was acting as if she'd known her a lifetime.

As he backed out of the drive, Casey and Tori waved at Carol standing on the steps. She returned their wave before entering the house. "She's a wonderful person," Tori spoke up.

"And a chatterbox to boot," he chuckled easily. "She's been like that all the while we grew up. I'm happy to see she's in a better frame of mind now, though."

"What do you mean?"

"After our parent's deaths, Carol had a serious bout with depression. She had to get counseling for a long time, but it seems as if she's snapping out of it."

"It must have been hard on you both," Tori said softly.

"It was, but more so with Carol. She always depended on mom for advice. That's the reason I try to give Carol a little extra attention."

"If I'd had a brother, I would have wanted him to be just like you," she admitted. "I don't know what I'd have done these past weeks without you."

"Now, you're going to give me a swelled head," he laughed, filling the car with the pleasing sound.

They rode in silence for several miles, each with their own thoughts. When Casey turned the corner and pulled onto the lot at the studio, her features changed. She knew what was coming tonight and the thought almost terrified her into immobility. For several minutes, she sat next to him without offering to get out.

"You don't have to look so frightened. Remember, I'll always be there to protect you, no matter what. Whoever it is may not come tonight, and all your worries will be for nothing."

"You're right," she murmured as she got out of the car and walked beside him to the door.

Entering the studio, they heard shouts drifting out to them in the hallway. The angry voices were again coming from Mack's office. This time, Casey didn't bother going over to check what was going on. He glanced through the glass on the door panel and saw Mack and Scot embroiled in an argument.

"Do you think we should go in and stop them?"

"No, we're not going to bother them." He placed his hand on her back and led the way to the front of the building. Whatever they're arguing about doesn't concern us."

When they reached the newsroom, she felt surprised by Dominic's greeting. "How's it going, Tori?" He sounded in almost a jovial mood. "You look rested up."

She looked startled over his changed attitude. Usually, he didn't have a kind word for her. "I do feel more rested, Dominic," she answered, with a smile curving her lips.

"You'll be going on tonight, won't you?" His gaze searched her face.

She thought she heard the sound of eagerness in his tone. Something must have happened between Dominic and Scot for him to show this amount of enthusiasm for her return. "As far as I know, unless Mack decides differently."

"Tori," Casey broke into their conversation, figuring now was as good a time as any to start giving out his address. "I'm going to leave in a few minutes, but if my associate calls, tell him to meet me at my cabin. You remember the address, don't you?"

"I'm not sure," she answered, playing along with him. "Give it to me again and I'll write it down."

"Number One, Cambridge Road," he told her, watching as Tori scribbled the address onto a sheet of paper.

Dominic looked across at Casey. "I know the area. There's some beautiful open country in that region, almost like a wilderness."

"Yes, there is," Casey agreed with him. "I bought the cabin a few years ago for privacy."

"Are we stopping there tonight after the broadcast?" She lowered her lashes to hide the guilty sensation filling her over leading Dominic on. She couldn't look in Dominic's direction, but she could feel his intent gaze watching her.

"Yes, but I'll have to leave you alone tonight for a while until I run an errand. I promise it shouldn't take over an hour, or so."

She nodded her head in understanding. While they discussed their plans for later, she felt the knotted up tension invading her chest. The sensation felt so strong, she felt ready to explode with the strain, but she swallowed down the emotion. Having to hide the turmoil inside her, made her almost physically ill.

"I knew someone who lived near your cabin," Dominic told Casey, unaware of the tension swiftly racing through Tori. "He moved a couple of months ago before winter set in. After the snow stranded him in his home for over a month, he said he'd had enough."

"He must not be of the hearty stock," Casey chuckled. "All you need is a good jeep, or some other type of four-wheel drive vehicle to get you around."

"I suppose, but he decided to move back to sunny Florida."

"It's his loss," Casey remarked, turning to look at Tori. "I should get going." He reached for her unexpectedly and gathered her close. Leaning his mouth next to her ear, he whispered, "Don't look so frightened." When he lifted his head, he gazed into her troubled green eyes. He didn't say anything to

her, but his wink gave her courage. It also gave her the promise she needed that he wouldn't let her down.

"Joan's probably waiting for me," she murmured as soon as he released her. "I'll see you after work." A tremulous smile lined her lips.

"You can count on it," he said in a lowered tone.

She watched him walk in the direction of Mack's office, before making her way over to Joan's cubicle. As she entered the door, she found Joan waiting for her.

"I didn't think you could drag yourself away from Casey," she said jokingly. "When I walked into the studio a while ago, it looked as if you and he were oblivious to the world. Why can't I find a guy like him?"

"Where have you looked lately?" she smiled at her, hiding her nervousness. "I'm sure they're out there somewhere."

"If you ever want to ditch him, I'll be waiting with open arms."

"I wouldn't hold my breath," she giggled, more from being tense than from the feeling of amusement.

"Well, I suppose we should get started on your makeup before Mack decides to send Scot on tonight," she said flippantly. "I'm not in the mood to put up with that pompous ass again."

She gave her a questioning look. "What happened between you and Scot?"

"For starters, he didn't like the color of the make-up I had to use on him. He brought Mack in and made a big scene over it."

"Why on earth did he argue over the makeup?"

"I couldn't hide the wrinkles along his jaw line and he thought I did it on purpose." She shrugged her shoulders. "There's nothing that will help him, except a plastic surgeon."

"He is a vain man. The thought that his youth is behind him has made him bitter. Well, so much for Scot Carter, let's get to work on you."

She sat quietly in the chair while Joan applied her makeup.

After several minutes, she stood back to look at her work. "Perfect," she murmured.

"Thanks, and I'll see you later," she said, walking out into the hallway toward the front of the studio. She joined Dominic at the desk and he handed her the segments of the news Mack had given her. He didn't say one word about her getting the juiciest stories that evening. It seemed as if Dominic felt pleased to have her anchoring with him again.

While she did her stories, she tried concentrating on the material. But at the back of her thoughts was what may happen later on that night. Several times, she stammered over a sentence and received curious glances from Dominic. Eventually, the lights dimmed and the red light went off on the camera. She sat back in her seat feeling emotionally drained. She didn't think she had enough energy to stand. When she glanced up and saw Casey, she felt some of the tension evaporating.

He walked toward her and stopped just inches from where she sat. "Ready to leave?"

"All set." She supposed Casey had set everything in motion that evening while she did her newscast. Now, all they had to do was make a pretense that they were going home without a worry in the world.

As they walked through the hallway, Casey's voice rang out making sure everyone in the studio heard him. "I'll drop you off at the cabin first. There's some business I have to take care of, but I won't be gone long."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Mack look up, but he quickly turned his head as he continued his conversation with Dominic and Scot. When they reached his car, she felt as if her legs would no longer support her. The fear had returned, reaching a crescendo, almost blocking off her air passage. She quickly gulped deeply, restoring some of her precious oxygen.

He reached for her hand. "Try to calm down," he soothed her, talking in gentle tones. "It will all be over soon."

As they continued in the direction of the cabin, she kept her thoughts silent, bracing herself for what could happen. She hoped that it didn't turn out to be any of her coworkers. She noticed how he drove at a normal speed, glancing in his rear view mirror from time to time. Apparently, someone had taken the bait and followed them. The car behind them had turned at every stoplight and alley that they had, although they drove at a safe distance. He deliberately led the driver on another route, turning when it wasn't necessary. All the while, the headlights of the other car stayed within two car lengths of them. When they reached the access road to the property, he saw how the driver behind him slowed and dropped back. As he pulled to the front entrance, their visitor drove off to the side of the road and parked beneath the trees.

He didn't want Tori any more frightened than she already was so he didn't mention that they had company. "You go inside and I won't be far away," he told her, cupping her cheeks between his fingertips. Leaning toward her, he gently kissed her lips.

She slowly made her way toward the cabin. She unlocked the door and disappeared inside. Only minutes passed before she had company. She braced herself for what was to come. The door had flown open and in walked two men dressed in hooded masks to disguise their identity. "What do you want?" Tori cried out, backing away into the wall in the hallway.

"I warned you about getting out of the news business, but you didn't listen," one of the men said, his voice sounding muffled from the thick mask on his face. The other man hadn't said one word. He stood

watching what was happening. The man doing all the talking suddenly advanced toward Tori. The knife that he raised over his head caught the glint of the overhead light.

Casey came from his crouched position near the back door. He charged across the room and leaped onto the man's back. Wrestling the intruder to the floor, the knife flew across the room before Casey's fist made connection with the man's jaw. The man slumped in an unconscious state at Tori's feet. The other man started to hurry toward the door, but Casey reached out and grabbed the back of his overcoat, stopping him.

"Not so fast," Casey growled in a menacing tone. "Now, we're going to see who the two of you are." He swung the man around and reached for the hooded mask, ripping it away from his face.

When it flew off, Tori stood in a shocked silence. Her heart began hammering in pain and disgust.

## Chapter Sixteen

Mack stared at Tori with a sightless expression. Her horrified gaze met his and the raw pain of what she experienced shined brightly in her eyes. She couldn't believe that it was Mack. Her stricken gaze followed Casey's movements as he leaned down toward the other man on the floor. He again ripped the dark mask away, revealing Scot Carter's face beneath it. Tears developed in Tori's eyes over the way the two men had plotted together and tried to kill her.

"You're going to have to answer a few questions, Mack?" Casey said between clenched teeth. "Why did you do this to Tori?"

For a long time, Mack didn't say a word. Eventually, he sighed deeply and glanced at her "I never meant for it to go this far, and I'm sorry it did," he offered her an apology, his tone barely audible in the quiet room. "It was only meant to scare you into quitting the business. I didn't have any idea Scot had a knife with him tonight."

"Call the police, Tori," Casey said, making sure the two men stayed put. "Why was it so important for Tori to quit as news broadcaster?" The pieces of the puzzle just didn't fit.

"Scot's been blackmailing me for the last six months," he said simply. "There wasn't much else I could do but go along with his plan. I'm getting too old to start over in some other type of business and he knew that."

"What did he have on you?" Casey pressed for answers.

"Somehow, he found out I'd embezzled money from the studio and threatened to turn me in if I didn't help him get his job back as an anchor. You have to believe me, Casey, I didn't know which way to turn."

"And you let him go this far!" Casey shouted, the veins standing out on his throat. "Did you know he cut her brake lines and practically destroyed her apartment?"



"No, he didn't tell me those details," Mack conceded tiredly. "The only things I knew about were the letters."

"Why did you find it necessary to hire me if you were in on it the entire time?"

"I didn't want Tori hurt, and I swear I didn't know about the car, or her apartment. I knew that Scot could be vindictive, but not to these lengths," he admitted, his gaze drifting to where she stood. "I'm sorry again, Tori, if I've caused you pain."

"Oh, Mack, I trusted you!" she cried, feeling the sadness spilling into her heart. "You were like a second father to me and I would never have suspected you."

"Believe me, I wasn't trying to hurt you," he said again, swallowing hard.

Right at that moment, Scot came to shaking the cobwebs from his head. He rose and looked at the other three watching him. His jaw looked swollen to double its size and he had a cut above his eye. There was a stream of blood flowing down his face, adding to the pathetic sight he looked right then. He looked at Casey and then over to Tori. "Why couldn't you have just quit?" He was angry. "No, you had to hang on and take my livelihood away from me. Someday, someone will do the same to you and I hope you suffer the way I have."

"I wouldn't have dreamed your antagonism reached those levels, Scot." A tremble filled her tone.

"Well, now you know! If it hadn't been for O'Rourke, I'd have gotten rid of you and would have my old job back."

"I wouldn't have let you hurt her," Mack spoke up.

"What could you have done about it? I didn't tell you that I planned to finish her off this evening. You're so weak, Mack, I despise you."

The wail of a siren filled the evening air, interrupting their heated words. Casey opened the door and glanced out toward the roadway. Flashing lights filled the darkness as the car made its approach toward the front entrance. After the police entered the cabin, Casey began explaining why he had Tori call them. The detective on duty was already familiar with Tori's case from having talked to Casey on a previous occasion and seeing the threatening letters she'd received.

While the police led Mack and Scot out to the patrol car, she turned away and walked into the living room. So much had happened tonight that she wanted to block it out of her thoughts. Her heart felt like a chunk of ice. Mack had meant so much to her, and to think he had agreed to Scot's bizarre plan in getting rid of her was more than she could digest. Moment's later she heard the door closing and looked up to see Casey entering the room.

He walked over to the couch where she sat huddled in a ball of misery. "If it's any consolation to you, I didn't have a clue that it was Mack involved. I suspected Dominic from the start, and then added Scot

to my list. The report I picked up in Chicago pointed to the two men. I also found out that Josh Kennedy could have been capable of threatening you.”

“So, that’s the reason we had to do it this way,” she said, feeling his arm draping her shoulder warmly.

“Yes, but I had a lot of misgivings trying to convince myself to use you as bait. But, there was nothing else I could do.”

“I know you didn’t have a choice and thank you for all you’ve done for me.” She moved out of his arms and stood up. “I guess with everything settled, it’s time I started packing.” She made a move toward the staircase.

Casey didn’t waste any time in blocking her path. “Not so fast.” He reached for her and gathered her in his arms. “We need to talk. There’s so much I want to say to you.” He guided her over to the couch, setting her down, before joining her. He was silent for several minutes as he held her tightly to him. When he lifted his head, he gazed tenderly into her eyes. “Do you think you might want to hire me as your permanent guardian angel?” His tone suddenly filled with a tender sound, “Well, now you know! If it hadn’t been for O’Rourke, I’d have gotten rid of you and would have my old job back.”

“I have all the qualifications, which I’ve proved to you tonight.”

“You want me to hire you as my guardian angel? Why would I need one now? You’ve already caught the men who were behind it.”

“I see you’re going to make this difficult for me,” he murmured, getting up from the couch and bending down on one knee in front of her. He gathered her hands warmly in his and his gaze rose to meet hers. “Will you marry me?”

The simple question filled the air around her and she had a puzzled expression lining her brow. “Why do you want to marry me?”

“Haven’t you figured it out already?” A smile curved his full lips. “I love you and never want to be away from you again. Tonight, I felt like a part of me died when I saw Scot lunging toward you with the knife.” The smile slowly faded and a frown replaced it as he bared his soul to her. “If he had hurt you, I couldn’t have been responsible for what I’d have done to him.”

“Oh, Casey, you do love me,” she said in wonder, her heart filling with joy at his confession. “I’ve loved you for so long, but I thought you only thought of me as someone you had to protect.”

“I’ll always be there to protect you, all through our lives,” he promised, reaching down to lift her into his arms. Gently, he carried her toward the staircase. “I’ll always be your lover and guardian angel rolled into one.”

Slowly, he mounted the steps toward the second level of the house. Tori wrapped her arms around his neck, feeling his strength flowing into her. She would never feel frightened again while Casey was by her side showing his love for her.

As he opened the bedroom door, he gazed down into her upturned face and saw the tears coating her eyes. "Why are you crying?"

"These are tears of happiness over how my life has finally turned out."

Casey took his foot and pushed the door closed, shutting out the world.

Tori didn't tell Casey that night, but she planned to give up her job as broadcaster and put her energy into starting a family to share with him. This would also enable her to have free time to concentrate on doing her share in helping the homeless.

## About the Author

Mary Ann is married with two sons and writes erotic romances full time with her sister Suzanne. Suzanne is also married with two daughters and also devotes her time to writing.