Romantic Suspense
INTRIGUE

His 7-Day Fiancée

Gail Barrett

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Содержание

His 7-Day Fiancée 6
Table of Contents 7
Chapter 1 8
Chapter 2 14
Chapter 3 20
Chapter 4 28
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Table of Contents

Cover Page
Title Page
About The Author
Dedication
Acknowledgments
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Epilogue
Copyright

Gail Barrett always dreamed of becoming a writer. After living everywhere from Spain to the Bahamas, raising two children and teaching high-school Spanish for years, she finally fulfilled that lifelong goal. Her writing has won numerous awards, including Romance Writers of America's prestigious Golden Heart. Gail currently lives in western Maryland with her two sons, a quirky Chinook dog and her own Montana rancher turned retired coastguard officer hero. Write to her at PO Box 65, Funkstown, Maryland 21734-0065, USA, or visit her website, www.gailbarrett.com.

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Chapter 1

H e was watching her again.

Fear razored through her belly like the slash of a switchblade—swift, hot, deep. It rippled through her awareness, stripped away her composure, shattering the illusion of safety she'd so desperately built.

Leaving her weak, defenseless, exposed.

No. Amanda Patterson wheezed air past her strangled throat, pressed her palm to her rioting heart. She wasn't weak, not anymore. And she refused to be vulnerable again.

She jerked her gaze past the line of stretch limos, inhaled deeply to steady her nerves. Cars idled by the casino on the gridlocked Strip, their horns blaring, stereos booming. Neon lights beckoned and flashed. Andpeople streamed past, an endless parade of humanity—laughing, fearless people out to have fun on a warm April night.

She let out her breath, eased the death grip she had on her wrist, forced her shoulders to relax. She was imagining things. Wayne wasn't watching her. He wasn't even in Las Vegas. Her exhusband was in Maryland, in prison, exactly where he belonged.

She was safe. *Safe.* She was thousands of miles away from Wayne, rid of him forever. She was in a new house, getting a new job, starting a new life.

Her sister, Kendall, finished paying the taxi driver and flashed her a smile. "Ready to rock?"

She dragged in another breath, tugged up the corners of her mouth. "You bet."

Kendall tilted her head. Her thick, honeybrown hair slid over her sculpted dancer's arms. "What's wrong? You're not worrying about Claire already are you?"

Her sister knew her too well. "No, of course not. Mrs. Schmidt seems great."

"She is great. And you warned her about Claire's allergies a dozen times. So stop worrying. Claire will have a great time. Mrs. Schmidt will spoil her to death."

To death. Amanda's heart squeezed. Dread shivered through her veins, but she shook off the gloomy thought. This was ridiculous. She was safe. Her three-year-old daughter was safe.

And she wasn't going to let her old fears ruin her new life.

"Then what is it?" Kendall probed. "It better not be Wayne because if you're going to let that creep—"

"It's not him. And I'm fine, really," she lied, embar-rassed to let her sister know how rattled she was, how hard it was to quell that horrible feeling that he was spying on her, controlling her, even after all these months.

Kendall studied her with those perceptive hazel eyes. Then her mouth softened. "Nothing's going to happen. You know that, right?"

"Right." She wouldn't let it. No matter how badly she'd mucked up the past, she owed her daughter a safe and stable life. Heck, she owed it to herself. She'd endured a hellish marriage, the terror of being stalked.

Now she was done with the past, done with the paranoia and fear—and on to a much better life.

She straightened her shoulders, tugged the hem of the tight red minidress Kendall had insisted she wear and tried for a lighter tone. "But getting arrested for indecent exposure isn't exactly what I need right now. Are you sure this dress is legal?"

Kendall tossed back her head and laughed, her trademark exuberance drawing the gazes of passing men. "Mandy, this is Vegas. The place where anything goes."

"Yes, I know, but—"

"But nothing. That dress is fabulous—although I still say you should have lost that ugly purse. Now, come on," she continued when Amanda opened her mouth to defend the huge, battered bag. "Lighten up. This is your lucky night out, remember?"

"Luck. Right." She latched on to Kendall's arm, turned toward the arched entrance to the famed Janus casino. "But walk slowly. I'm not used to these skyscraper heels."

"You're not used to having fun. Which is exactly why we're here. You're going to let loose for once—gamble, meet some hot men, have a ball."

Amanda grimaced. She had no intention of meeting men, hot or otherwise. She knew her limits too well. But Kendall was determined to light up the town, and the least she could do was try.

"Wait until you see this lobby," Kendall added as they walked by a gleaming Bentley, then climbed the marble steps. "You're going to love it. It's right up your alley."

"My alley? Since when is gambling my thing?" She'd never placed a bet in her life.

"You'll see." The uniformed doorman swung the door open, and Kendall shot Amanda a knowing smile.

Amanda dutifully followed her inside. She gave herself a mental pep talk, tried to resist that constant urge to scan the crowds and monitor her surroundings for Wayne—a habit born of the need to survive. But she didn't need to worry about Wayne anymore. And she was *not* going to let him ruin this night.

She stepped past the doorway into the lobby, looked up and abruptly stopped. A huge, vaulted ceiling soared above her. Beneath it towered an enormous stone aqueduct, its trilevel arcades a marvel of ancient times.

"Oh, my," she murmured, and every thought of Wayne fled her mind. Captivated, she twirled in a circle, ignoring the people streaming around her, intent on absorbing every detail—the statues of Roman emperors, the decorative medallions and columns, the chariot perched on a marble dais.

"I told you," Kendall said while Amanda still gaped, trying to take it all in.

"You were right." This place was amazing. Fabulous. She felt as if she'd been dropped into ancient Rome.

Her gaze lingered on the colorful murals, the display of early black-glazed pottery, and the closet archaeologist in her thrilled. Whoever designed this place deserved an award. She couldn't believe how authentic it looked.

A woman brushed past, jostling her, and Amanda staggered to stay on her feet. She knew that she needed to move, that she was blocking the entrance, but she couldn't seem to budge. She wanted to absorb every-thing—the gurgling fountains, the flickering torches on the walls, the lions pacing restlessly behind glass. *Lions.* She shook her head, incredulous. This place was unreal.

Then her eyes settled on a plaster relief of Janus, and the tight ball knotting her belly began to slide loose. Janus, the Roman god of doorways and gates, endings and beginnings—the perfect symbol for her new life.

And for the first time in ages a sliver of optimism surged inside her, a longburied glimmer of hope. She really was going to be all right here. She'd find a new job. Her daughter would thrive. She'd finally find the peace she deserved.

She smiled then, inhaling the soothing scent of moisture from the splashing fountains, the heavenly aroma of roses and gladioli brimming from urns. Still smiling, she turned to join her sister. The tang of a man's aftershave teased her nose.

Wayne's aftershave.

Her heart tripped. She stumbled, anxiety drumming through her. She glanced around, frantic to find the source of the scent, but a crowd formed around her, blocking her view.

Calm. Stay calm, she urged herself sternly. Wayne wasn't here. This had nothing to do with him.

She hauled in air, struggled to swallow around the tension gripping her throat, determined not to overreact. She stepped to the side, tried to work her way through the noisy throng to find where her sister had gone. But the people shifted and trapped her in.

"Get out of my way," a man in a white shirt shouted beside her, and his rough, raised voice agitated her nerves.

"The hell I will," another man answered.

Amanda glanced up, caught the first man's glowering face and took another step back. They were too close. Too close. Trying to beat back the onrush of panic, she cleared her throat. "Excuse me."

They ignored her. Her anxiety building, she prodded the nearest man with her elbow, intent on getting past. But another whiff of aftershave curled through her senses, and her heart made a frenzied throb.

Stop it, she lectured herself. She had no reason to be afraid. This man had nothing to do with Wayne.

And these people were not going to hurt her. She had to get over the irrational fear, this wrenching need to escape.

She pivoted, wobbled on her too-high heels, determined to get free of this mess. But then a fistfight broke out. Someone shoved. The white-shirted man pushed back, sending the beefy man into her side. Thrown off balance, she gasped, dropped her purse, and nearly fell. The contents of her handbag spilled over the floor.

Great.

Her hands trembling, urgency making her head light, she knelt, scooped up her cell phone and keys. The man in the white shirt squatted beside her. "Sorry," he muttered, his voice gruff. His aftershave assailed her, setting off a spurt of panic, unleashing a bone-deep reaction she couldn't control.

"Just leave it. Please. It doesn't matter," she pleaded, needing him to move far away. But he snatched up her wallet and tissues with his thick, stubby fingers, and stuffed them into her bag. Desperate now, unable to meet his eyes, she grabbed her purse, clutched it to her chest and rose.

"Break it up!" someone shouted as she turned and stumbled away from the arguing men. She searched through the crowd for her sister, found her waiting a few yards away.

"There you are," her sister said." What are you doing?"

"Nothing." Her voice came out high and rushed, and she sucked in a calming breath. "I just got bumped and my purse spilled."

"I told you not to bring that bag."

"I know." She reopened the drawstring top, pawed through the jumbled contents, double-checked that her wallet was there. Relief flooded through her, and she blew out her pent-up breath.

"Well, try to keep up this time," Kendall said, and shook her head.

Feeling foolish, berating her loss of control, she trailed her sister across the room. So she'd smelled Wayne's aftershave. Big deal. He'd worn a popular brand. She'd let her imagination run away from her.

And she had to stop it. She couldn't keep letting him do this to her. Every time she thought of him, he won.

But as they crossed the enormous lobby—past the restless lions, past the Roman arches leading to intriguing gardens and baths—that feeling of trepidation crept through her again, as if eyes were boring into her back. She straightened her shoulders, determined not to assume that submissive hunch, and tried to shrug the sensation off. But it only intensified, crawling up her spine, her neck, growing stronger with every step.

Her temper flared. This was ridiculous. She didn't deserve this constant fear. She had to put an end to the lunacy now.

"Wait a minute," she said to Kendall. Defiant, she stopped, whipped around.

And met the dark, searing eyes of a man.

But not the one who'd bumped her. This man stood apart from the rest, his feet planted wide, his hands braced low on his hips, like an ancient conqueror surveying his realm.

His thick black hair gleamed in the lights. Heavy beard stubble shadowed his jaw. He had black, slashing brows, taut, masculine cheeks and a mouth so sensual it made her breath catch. A black suit gloved his tall frame.

He was handsome, riveting—shockingly so. But more than his dark looks commanded attention. He had a stillness about him, a feral intensity that exuded intelligence, authority, power.

Her heart thumped, made a funny zigzag in her chest. The word *predator* flashed through her mind.

The edge of his mouth kicked up at her blatant inspection. His eyes smoldered even more. Then his own gaze dropped, making a long, slow slide over the length of her, trailing a firestorm of heat in its wake.

Her knees trembled. A zap of awareness sizzled her blood. And a completely different type of tension arose in her nerves.

Her face burning, she whirled back toward her sister.

"Whoa, when I said hot men, I didn't mean that hot," Kendall said.

"What?" Breathless, mortified that she'd responded so outrageously, she grabbed her sister's arm and hauled her away.

"You know who that was, don't you? That was Luke Montgomery. *The* Luke Montgomery. Oh, for goodness sakes," Kendall said when she shot her a blank look.

"Don't you know anything? He's the billionaire who owns this place."

"You're kidding." She'd been ogling a billionaire? How ridiculous could she get?

"No, I'm not kidding. And I can't believe you haven't heard of him. He's been in the news for weeks. You know, because of that woman who was murdered, that casino heiress, Candace Rothchild?"

"No." Amanda slowed to navigate the steps into the gaming pit. She'd been too worried about her own precarious situation to follow the news.

Her sister paused at the bottom of the stairs and huffed out her breath. "You're hopeless. It's a good thing you're in my hands now. I'll get you caught up on tabloid gossip and have you living in sin in no time."

"Great." A wry smile nudged the corner of her mouth. "Just what I need. My own personal guide to corruption."

Kendall grinned back. "Hey, don't knock it."

"I'm not." Her sister might not lead a conventional life, but she did know how to have fun. And at least she hadn't screwed everything up like Amanda had.

Determined to forget all that, she glanced around at the flashing lights and jangling machines, the kaleidoscope of colors and noise. "All right, what's first?"

"Slots. Once you win a little, gain some confidence, we'll graduate to blackjack."

Amanda sighed. She was pathetic. Even her sister knew she couldn't just plunge in and enjoy herself. She had to be coaxed in slowly, teased into having fun.

Her sister took her arm, led her down the aisle to a couple of empty stools. "Here. These machines are loose. They pay out more often."

"How do you know that?"

Kendall propped one slim hip on the stool, squirmed to keep her own short dress from creeping up. "They do it on purpose. They figure if you win here, they can lure you back to the tables and steal your shirt. Now sit down and listen up."

Amanda slid onto the next stool over. She placed her purse on her lap, her amusement growing as her sister gave her a crash course on gambling with slots.

Not that her sister's expertise surprised her. Growing up, Kendall had been everything Amanda was not—confident, popular, outgoing. She'd been the star of every party, the diva on every stage.

And she hadn't been afraid to pursue her goals. The day after high school ended she'd hopped on the first bus to Vegas and landed her dream job dancing in a show.

Whereas the far-too-cautious, ever-responsible Amanda had become a teacher and married Wayne.

"Got it?" Kendall asked.

Amanda pulled her thoughts from the past. "I think so." She tugged a twenty dollar bill from her wallet and fed it into the machine, saw the credits appear.

"Here goes." She inhaled, selected the maximum number of coins, and pushed the button to spin the machine. Bars whirred, then stopped. More credits appeared, and she widened her eyes. "Hey, I won."

"I knew you would." Kendall's smile was smug. "I told you your luck was going to change tonight."

"Maybe so." Buoyed by that small success, she pushed the button again. Three lemons. Getting the hang of it now, she threw herself into the game. Cherries combined with sevens. Lemons were followed by bars. Bells dinged. Colored lights flashed. Credits accumulated, then disappeared. Beside her, Kendall cheered, groaned and clapped at her own progress. And a half hour and a free margarita later, Amanda felt like a seasoned pro.

"Ready for the blackjack table?" Kendall called over the noise.

Amanda glanced up. "Go ahead. I'll be there in a minute. I've just got a few pulls left."

"Okay. It's in the back." Kendall drained her drink, hopped off her stool and then jiggled her legs to straighten her dress. "Don't forget to take your ticket. We'll cash out before we leave."

Amanda waved her off and returned her attention to her machine. In the periphery of her vision, she saw Kendall collect her ticket and leave.

She pulled the lever. Lemon-bar-seven. *Drats.* She pushed the button again and won. She grinned, pleased with her take so far. Not too shabby for her first attempt at gambling. She was ahead by fifteen bucks.

And she had to hand it to her sister. It was fun to do somethingmindlessforonce,toforgetherproblemsand relax. Kendall had been right to insist that they come.

She gave the button a final press, then waited for the tumbler to stop. "Come on, jackpot," she murmured. A seven stuck. Then another. She held her breath, her hopes rising, her eyes glued on the machine.

The scent of Wayne's aftershave drifted past.

Her heart went still. Every cell in her body tensed.

The machine stopped. She stared at it blindly, her palms suddenly sweating, her pulse pounding so hard she could barely hear.

Wayne wasn't here. He couldn't be here.

Then why was this happening to her?

She gripped her purse like a lifeline, fought the urge to glance over her shoulder and check. She couldn't keep doing this. She couldn't keep panicking and falling apart. Dear God, it had to stop.

But the need to look back grew even stronger—the instinct to protect herself, take cover. *Survive.* Unable to stand it, she leaped from the stool and whipped around.

No one was there.

She didn't move.

Lights flashed on another machine. A woman squealed and laughed down the aisle. Amanda hitched out her breath, ran her gaze up and down the rows, but there was no sign of the man who'd bumped her, no signof Wayne.

Thoroughly rattled, she turned back to her machine and printed out her credits with trembling hands. Had she imagined that scent? Was that even possible? Her mentally ill mother had hallucinated before she'd—

No. She was not losing her mind.

Maybe it was a flashback, a delayed reaction to stress. The past few years had worn her down completely—Wayne's abuse, the constant fear for her daughter's safety, the painful divorce and move. No wonder she was suffering now.

And she would conquer this fear. *She would.*

Her heart still racing, she inhaled to calm her nerves. Then she walked deliberately toward the back of the casino, refusing to let herself rush. There was nothing to be afraid of. Nothing.

She paused at the end of the aisle, unsure which way to go. Taking a guess, she turned right.

The scent of aftershave hit her again.

Her stomach balled tight. Her heart sped into her throat. She picked up the pace, walking faster now, even though she knew there was nothing wrong. She was safe, *safe.*

She hurried past a group of noisy gamblers. A bell dinged, and someone cheered. Knowing she was acting foolish but unable to stifle the fear, she walked as fast as she could on the spindly heels. *Run, run, run* bludgeoned her nerves.

She reached the end of the aisle, turned again, then reached some swinging doors. Oh, no. She'd gone the wrong way. The blackjack tables had to be across the pit.

She stopped, started to turn, but Wayne's scent swarmed her again. A hard, narrow object bit into her back, and she froze.

"That's right," the man said. "Stay quiet, and you won't get hurt."

Her knees buckled. A dull roar invaded her skull. The obscene smell of aftershave permeated the air.

"Walk over to the doors. Slow now." He rammed the gun deeper into her back, and she stepped forward, trying to battle through the hysteria and think. It wasn't Wayne. He had the wrong voice. But then what on earth did he want?

"Stop," he demanded when she reached the double doors. "Now give me the ring. And no fast moves."

"R…ring?" He wanted her jewelry? But she didn't wear any. She wheezed in the too-thick air. "But—"

"Now." His voice turned harsher. He prodded her again with the gun.

"But I don't…"

The double doors swung open. A waitress stepped out, balancing a tray.

Now or never.

She lunged, slammed into the waitress. The woman shrieked, staggered back and dropped the tray.

Amanda didn't hesitate. She ran.

Chapter 2

The soft buzz of his private telephone line cut through the silence—muted, deceptively quiet, like the rattle of a Mojave Desert Sidewinder preparing to strike. Luke Montgomery stared out his penthouse window at the Las Vegas skyline shimmering against the dark velvet sky. He'd left instructions not to be disturbed. A call now could only mean one thing.

Trouble. Just what he didn't need.

He exhaled, knowing he couldn't postpone the inevitable, and padded across the carpet to his desk. He punched the button to answer the phone. "Yeah."

"Mr. Montgomery. Frank Ruiz in security. I'm sorry to bother you, but there was an armed robbery attempt in the gaming pit. I thought you'd want to know."

"I'll be right there."

Luke disconnected the phone and frowned. An armed robbery attempt. Interesting timing with the investment consortium scheduled to vote in just two weeks. A coincidence or something more?

Thoughtful, he pulled his suit jacket from the chair where he'd tossed it, slipped it on as he strode to the door. Coincidence or not, he couldn't afford the bad publicity. Candace Rothchild's murder had caused enough problems.

Not that being suspected of murder had hurt his business. He exited his penthouse, the edge of his mouth ticked up in a cynical smile. Crowds flocked to his casino, whipped up by lurid rumors in the tabloids, hoping to glimpse the man who'd supposedly clubbed the heiress to death.

But his consortium investors weren't nearly as intrigued. The murder—combined with the downturn in the economy—had made them nervous. Too nervous. More problems now would cause them to bolt.

And no way could he let that happen.

His gaze hardening, he crossed to his private elevator, then leaned back against the mahogany panels as it started down. He had everything riding on this project. He'd spent twenty years meticulously constructing his empire, amassing money, power.

Twenty years plotting revenge.

The elevator doors slid open, and he headed toward the security office, ignoring the employees scurrying out of his way. Nothing could jeopardize this project. Nothing. If this robbery attempt was legit, he'd hush it up, keep it out of the papers until the deal went through. And if it wasn't…

He mentally shrugged. Whoever had planned this escapade had made a mistake, a big one. No one played Luke Montgomery for a fool.

A lesson the Rothchilds should have learned long ago.

He entered the office, met the eyes of the guard on duty behind the desk. The balding man leaped to his feet. "Mr. Montgomery." He tugged at the tie dangling from his beefy neck.

Luke nodded, got straight to the point. "What's going on?"

"A woman said she was held up at gunpoint near the slot machines. I've pulled up the surveillance tapes. She's in the next room."

"Let's see the tapes." He rounded the desk as Ruiz lowered himself into his chair and keyed the bank of monitors to the proper time.

The screens flickered, and suddenly a woman strolled into view from a dozen angles. Her full hips swiveled with a seductive swing. Her high breasts shifted and swayed.

Luke's gaze cut to her face, and his heart made a sudden swerve. Well, hell. It was the blonde he'd admired earlier in the lobby.

He studied her now with frank appreciation. She was on the tall side, slender, but the tight dress revealed her ample curves. She had long, shiny hair, sweetly rounded hips, the kind of killer legs that could fuel his fantasies for years.

He slanted his head. She wasn't the usual overblown Vegas type, despite the skimpy dress. She seemed more natural, unstudied—a rarity in Sin City, a place where illusions ruled.

She stumbled on the milehigh heels, regained her balance and glanced around. The cameras caught her darting gaze, and his gut went still.

She looked furtive. Guilty.

Bad move, babe. Better to look nervous *after* the guy with the gun shows up.

As if on cue, a man appeared on scene. The newcomer kept his head bent low, his face carefully hidden from the camera's view. His long, stringy hair swung past his jaw, hiding his features even more.

Luke's gaze narrowed on the man's pleated blue shirt and black bow tie—the uniform his dealers wore. "Is he one of ours?"

"We don't know yet. We're checking the records now."

He rubbed his stubble-roughened jaw, watched the episode play out. The galley doors swung open. Awaitress steppedout, carrying a tray. The blonde crashed into her, then bolted off, while the man ran the other way.

He raised a brow. The blonde thought fast on her feet, he'd give her that much. "Who is she?"

The guard consulted his notes. "Amanda Patterson. Said she arrived in Las Vegas last week. She's staying with her sister, Kendall Patterson, a dancer in your teno'clock show."

Luke thought back to the brunette he'd seen with her in the lobby. A dealer and a dancer. An inside job, then? Probably a scam to sue the casino.

The spurt of disappointment took him by surprise. He knew better than to expect the blonde to be innocent. This was Vegas. Everyone was on the make. Even the prettiest face masked a conniving heart.

The guard switched to another screen, and Luke watched the man exit the casino, still hiding his face. He checked the time on the tape. Twenty minutes ago. No point looking for him now.

"Let me know what the employee search brings up. Contact legal, call the police. Get Martinez over here if you can." He and Martinez want to have to findwent way back to their childhood in Naked City, the slums beyond the Strip. He could count on him to keep the story hushed until the Phoenix deal went through.

He turned, headed down the hall to interview the blonde. Chances were that this was an inside job, but he couldn't rule out the Rothchilds. Harold Rothchild was buried in debt, his empire on the verge of collapse. Luke's project would seal his doom.

Which was exactly what Luke planned.

Of course, if the Phoenix project failed, he would suffer instead. He set his jaw. Good thing he didn't intend to fail.

He pushed open the office door, spotted the blonde standing by the desk. She turned toward him as he entered the room.

His gaze met hers. A sudden awareness shivered between them, and he hesitated in midstride.

She was even more attractive close up. Her eyes were a deep, startling blue, as vibrant as the desert sky. She had pale, creamy skin, a smattering of freckles on her feminine nose. Her lips looked soft and lush.

She was pretty, damned pretty—stunning if he factored in those world-class legs.

But this close he could also sense an aura of vulnerability about her. She stood with her shoulders hunched, her arms crossed tightly across her chest. Dark circles shadowed her eyes.

The sudden urge to protect her caught him off guard.

He frowned, shook himself out of his daze. This woman didn't need his protection. For all he knew, she was here to swindle him. "Amanda Patterson?"

"Yes." Her low, smoky voice slid through him, doing strange things to his insides.

He crossed the room. "I'm Luke Montgomery."

"Yes, I know, I…" A blush crept up her cheeks. "My sister pointed you out earlier."

He'd bet. He reached out his hand. She hesitated, then gripped his palm. The smooth, silky feel of her skin arrowed through him, deleting his thoughts. He was held immobile by those amazing blue eyes. His heart beat hard in his chest.

After several long moments, he realized he was still holding her hand. He scowled, pried his fingers loose, annoyed by the effort it took. What the hell was that about? Hehadn't been that affected by awoman in years.

And this one could be trying to deceive him.

"Have a seat." Anxious to put some distance between them, he retreated to the desk, then leaned back against it and folded his arms.

She perched on the leather chair in front of the desk and crossed her legs. His gaze fell to her lean, bare thighs, traced the elegant curve of her calves. Realizing his thoughts were derailing again, he lifted his eyes.

"So what happened?" His tone was more brusque than he'd intended, and she blinked.

She sat up straighter, flexed her wrist as if it ached. Her chest rose as she drew in a breath. "I was going to the blackjack tables to find my sister, but I got lost. I've never been here before. I started to turn around but then a…a man came up behind me."

Her voice trembled convincingly, but he was determined to stay objective. "He was armed?"

"I think so. He jabbed something into my back. I thought…it felt like a gun."

"Then what?"

"He said…he wanted my jewelry, my ring."

His gaze cut to her unadorned ears, to the cleavage bared by the plunging dress, and his mind flashed back to the tapes. He hadn't noticed any jewelry before the attack. A slipup there.

"So you handed it over?" he asked, knowing damned well she hadn't.

But she surprised him by shaking her head. "No, I…I don't have any jewelry, not anymore." She lifted one slender shoulder and lowered her eyes. "I sold everything a while back when I needed the money."

So she was short on cash. Good motive to run a scam.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. No matter how attractive she was, he didn't have time for this farce. He'd make sure the Rothchilds weren't involved, keep this damned thing out of the news, then let the police handle the rest.

"So you're saying a man held you up with a gun you didn't see, and demanded jewelry that you don't have."

A small frown creased her brow. "You don't believe me? You think I made this up?"

"We have cameras all over the casino. I saw the tapes." He raised his brows. "You looked nervous even before the man showed up."

Her smooth lips parted. The color drained from her face. "But that's because I thought…I thought…" She pressed her fingers to her lips and closed her eyes.

"You thought what? That you'd pretend to be attacked and sue the casino?"

Her eyes flew open, and she gasped. "You think I'd pretend about something like that? Are you joking?" She let out a highpitched laugh. "Oh, God. This figures. I thought…" She shook her head, gathered her bulky purse and rose. "Forget it."

"The hell I will." He pushed himself away from the desk and blocked her path. "You thought what?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter." She tried to step around him, but he reached out and grabbed her upper arm. She flinched, jerked back. "Let me go."

He dropped her arm, stunned by the urgency in her voice, the flash of fear in her eyes. She quickly scuttled away.

He studied her, taken aback. She couldn't be this good of an actress. She was actually afraid of him.

He eased apart his hands, made his expression neutral, his voice nonthreatening so she wouldn't bolt. "Look, I'm not trying to hurt you. I just need to know what happened."

"I…" She nodded, sucked in her breath, as if to pull herself together. "I didn't really…It was just…my exhusband. Wayne Wheeler. I thought he was here."

He eyed the distance she'd put between them, the wary way she watched him—defensive, alert, like a cornered animal ready to run. And anger stirred in his gut. He had no patience for abusive men. And unless he was wildly off base, this woman had been attacked.

He struggled to keep the emotion from his voice. "Your ex lives around here?"

She shook her head, sending her silky hair sliding over her arms. "He's in Maryland, in jail. It wasn't him. It wasn't even his voice. But I thought, earlier…I was just nervous. I overreacted. I'm sorry." She rubbed her forehead with a trembling hand, sank back into her chair.

He frowned. He didn't doubt her story. Her fear looked real…And the facts would be easy to check.

So what should he do about it? Assuming she was telling the truth, this still didn't eliminate the Rothchilds'involvement. Or her sister's. It wouldn't be the first time an unsuspecting family member had been an accomplice to a crime.

Which led him back to his original problem. He paced across the room, pivoted, then returned to lean against the desk. He had to contain this, keep it out of the news. He couldn't let that consortium implode.

Which meant making sure Amanda Patterson didn't talk.

But somehow the thought that anyone would hurt this gentle woman made it hard to stay detached.

"I need to go." Her eyes pleaded with his. "My sister will be wondering where I am. I left her a voice mail that I'd meet her in the lobby."

"You can leave as soon as you talk to the police." A knock sounded on the door, and he rose. "That's probably the detective now. I'll walk you out to the lobby when you're done."

"All right." Their gazes held. The vulnerable look in her eyes tugged at something inside him, urging him to shelter her, to keep her safe.

He shook it off. Her life, her problems were none of his concern. The only thing he needed to do was convince her not to talk. But she had been attacked in his casino. He could at least alleviate some of her fear. He turned, strode out the door.

Ramón Martinez from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department was waiting for him in the hall. "Martinez." Luke shook his hand, briefed him on the situation, and the need to keep it quiet for now. "Could you check on the ex and make sure he's still in jail?" he added. "The name's Wheeler. Wayne Wheeler."

"No problem." The detective flipped open his cell phone, called in the information. "It'll take a few minutes to run him through the system. I'll get a statement from the Patterson woman and get back to you on that."

"Thanks." Luke returned to the main office, had his security guard run the tapes again as he waited for the detective to finish up. Now that he'd heard Amanda's version of events, the anxiety in her eyes made sense.

His gaze lingered on the seductive flare of her hips, those endless legs. It was too bad she wasn't his type. She was a damned attractive woman. But he only dated celebrities, supermodels, women willing to hang on his arm for an evening in exchange for a fancy meal.

He didn't have relationships, and he didn't mix dating with business. And that's all Amanda Patterson could ever be—a business concern. One he needed to wrap up now.

She emerged from the office a few minutes later. “I heard back about Wheeler,” Martinez said from behind her. “He’s still in jail.”

“Good.” He caught Amanda’s gaze, and that disturbing attraction rocked through him again. His eyes dipped from her face to those killer legs, and he had to struggle to remember his plan. “I’ll walk you out.”

He nodded to the detective, held the door open for Amanda, then accompanied her down the carpeted hall. He liked how her long strides kept pace with his, how her height made it easy to meet her eyes.

“Thanks for checking on Wayne for me,” she said, her voice subdued. “It helps to know he’s far away.” Her eyes held his, and the worry lurking in those vivid eyes bothered him more than he cared to admit.

“No problem. I have a favor to ask, though.” They reached the door to the lobby, and he paused. “I’d like to keep this incident out of the news—at least for a couple of weeks. I’m in the middle of some negotiations right now, and I don’t want the publicity. So if anyone calls you—any reporters, the tabloids—I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk.”

“Okay.”

“The paparazzi can be persistent,” he warned her. “I doubt they’ll get wind of this, but if they do they’ll call, show up at your door, follow you around.”

“But that’s ridiculous.” Her forehead wrinkled. “Why would they care what happened to me?”

“They won’t. But I’m big news these days.”

“I see.” She bit her lip, made that flexing motion with her wrist again.

He frowned. “Did you get hurt back there?”

“What?” She looked at her wrist. “Oh. No, it’s an old injury. It aches sometimes.”

He nodded, tugged his business card from his inside pocket and held it out, determined to make sure she complied. “Here’s my number. Call me if they show up. I’ll top whatever they’re willing to pay.”

She blinked, shot him a look of disbelief. “You’re offering to pay me not to talk?”

“I told you that I don’t want the publicity right now.”

“Well, neither do I.” Stunned outrage tinged her voice. “I have a daughter to protect. I don’t want to be in the news.”

But money had a way of changing minds. And the tabloids’ pockets were deep.“ Take the card, Amanda.” He pressed it into her hand. “Just call me if they contact you.”

She glanced at the card and shook her head. “There’s really no need. I told you that I won’t talk.”

He let out a cynical laugh. “Promises don’t mean much when money’s involved.”

“Well, mine does.”

Her eyes simmered with indignation.

He tilted his head, impressed. Despite her air of fragility, the woman had courage. He liked how she held her ground.

Hell, he liked a lot of things about her. His gaze lowered, traced the sultry swell of her lips, then flicked back to her brilliant blue eyes. And hunger pulsed inside him, the slow, drugging beat of desire.

But this woman had no place in his plans. He stepped away, crushing back the urge to touch her, giving them some much-needed space.

She cleared her throat. “I’d say goodnight, but it hasn’t really been good, has it?”

“No, not good.” Especially with this disturbing attraction between them.

“Farewell, then.” She turned, pushed open the door.

He followed her into the lobby, then stopped, inhaling deeply to clear his mind. His eyes tracked the alluring swivel of her hips as she continued across the marble floor. She joined her sister, and the two women walked to the door.

But suddenly she paused, glanced back. Her eyes met his, and another bolt of electricity zapped his nerves. Then she pivoted on her high heels and went out the door.

For a long moment, he just stood there, the image of those lush lips and long legs scorched in his brain. Then he slowly eased out his breath.

So that was done. She was gone. He had no reason to see her again. His security chief and the police could handle the investigation from here.

He hoped her exhusband left her alone, though. He hated to think of her afraid, cowering before some brute.

And he hoped that he could trust her. Amanda Patterson was a wild card, an unknown, someone beyond his control.

Someone, he had a feeling, it would take a very long time to forget.

Chapter 3

The telephone was ringing again.

Amanda sat motionless on her sister's patio, her muscles tensing, the teaching application she'd filled out forgotten in her hand.

"Phone, Mommy," Claire announced from her turtleshaped sandbox in the yard.

"I know." Amanda tried not to let fear seep into her voice. "But Aunt Kendall's at rehearsal. We'll let the answering machine pick it up." And hope to God it wasn't another hang-up call.

The answering machine kicked on, and her sister's perky voice floated through the open sliding glass door. The machine beeped. The abrupt silence of the disconnected line made her stomach churn.

She set down her papers and rubbed her arms—chilled now, despite the heat. It was just another wrong number or a junk phone call. There was nothing sinister about people calling and hanging up. Annoying, yes. Dangerous, no.

Even if the hang-up calls had only begun three days ago, after the casino attack. Even if they now got a dozen such calls a day. Even if whenever she answered the phone, there was only heavy, ominous breathing—nothing more.

It couldn't be reporters. They would talk to her, ask questions, not just breathe and hang up.

This was something Wayne would do—something he had done to unsettle her nerves. But Wayne was in jail. That detective had checked.

She set her pen on the table and rose, placed a rock over the job application so it wouldn't flutter away. Regardless of who was calling, she wasn't going to let this get to her. And she wasn't going to let Claire sense her fear. She'd moved here to give her daughter a safer, more peaceful life, and she would succeed.

"It's time to get the mail and have our snack." She struggled to make her voice cheerful, but Claire still looked at her and frowned. "How about some apple juice and animal crackers today?"

"Okay." Claire trotted over, and Amanda brushed the sand off her daughter's bottom and hands, adjusted the sun hat flopping around her sweet face.

"Wait. Brownie." Claire grabbed the bear she'd propped on the patio chair and hugged it close. Too close. Had Claire picked up on her fear?

She forced a smile to lighten the mood. "Is Brownie going to help us get the mail?" She knew the answer, of course. Claire didn't go anywhere without her bear. Brownie ate with her, slept with her, played with her. She'd hugged off most of its fur, kissed the color from its once-black eyes. Amanda prayed that bear never got lost, or Claire would be destroyed.

"You two can lead the way," she added, and followed her along the walkway to the gate. Her sister lived in one of the new developments that had sprung up during the recent building boom. It was a modest, family-oriented neighborhood with two-story stucco homes, a far cry from Wayne's luxury condo at the Ritz Carlton in DC. And thank goodness for that. Wayne had been all about status, appearances. He didn't care that there'd been no place for Claire to ride a bike or play.

She unlatched the gate, waited for Claire to toddle through. She couldn't even begin to imagine how Luke Montgomery lived. She'd read up on him during the past few days, learned that he was a notorious playboy, a megabillionaire developer who owned casinos and resorts throughout the world. That suit he'd worn had probably cost more than her car.

An image of his broad, muscled shoulders, the dark, sexy planes of his face flashed into her mind. She didn't doubt the playboy part. The man was lethally attractive with his deeply graveled voice and intense eyes. And that moment in the hallway when she'd thought he was going to kiss her…

She shut the gate behind her with a forceful click. Surely she'd imagined his interest in her. Luke Mont-gomery operated completely outside her orbit—which was fine with her. She had all she wanted in life right here. Maybe she didn't hobnob with billionaires, and maybe she'd once dreamed

of a more exciting life, but she had a great sister, a daughter she adored. And soon she'd have a job and her own house, too.

She just needed to lose this constant fear.

"Wait for me," she warned Claire. She grabbed her daughter's hand to make sure she didn't dart off, then walked with her toward the mailbox. The warm sun shimmered off the neighbors' redtiled roofs. Palm fronds rustled in the breeze. Laughter and the thump of a bouncing basketball came from some teens shooting hoops down the street.

She let Claire open the mailbox and pull out the advertisements and bills. She lunged forward to catch a sheath of junk mail tumbling loose.

"Mine," Claire cried and clutched the mail.

"I'm just getting the stuff that fell." She scooped up the ads and stray letters and then closed the box. A plain white envelope in her hand caught her eye.

She paused, turned it over. No name. No address.

A sliver of foreboding snaked up her back.

She shook it off, exasperated by her overreaction. She was getting ridiculous, imagining danger at every turn. It was probably an advertisement. She tore open the back flap, pulled out the contents —a piece of white paper, some photos.

Photos of Claire.

Her heart stopped.

She flipped through the photos. Claire riding her pink tricycle. Claire eating at the kitchen table. Claire sleeping next to Brownie in her bed.

The air turned thick. Her hands shook as she unfolded the note. *"Put the diamond in the mailbox or else."*

Her lungs seized up. Sheer panic roared through her veins. She fought to maintain her composure, but every instinct screeched at her to snatch Claire up and flee.

Calm down, she ordered herself fiercely. Don't let Claire see your fear.

Forcing her feet to move slowly, normally, she followed her daughter back to the house. She looked casually to the neighbor's windows—no movement there. She opened the gate and let Claire through, then snuck a glance at the street. Empty.

But someone was spying on them, taking photos of Claire.

Her panic intensified, threatening to overwhelm her, but she ruthlessly crushed it down. She ushered Claire calmly into the house and locked the sliding glass door. She lifted Claire to the sink and washed her hands. Still working on autopilot, she took out the juice, helped Claire into her chair, opened the animal crackers and propped up the bear.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Claire asked, her voice tight.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Her falsely cheerful voice sounded too far away. "It's just a little hot in here. I'm going to close the drapes to keep it cool. I'll be right back."

She forced her lips into a brittle smile, closed the blinds on the sliding glass door and strolled sedately into the hall. Then she raced around the house like a maniac, locking the windows, yanking the drapes closed, scrambling up and down the stairs, rushing from room to room to room, throwing the deadbolts on every door.

She returned to the kitchen, sank into a seat across the table from Claire and covered her face with her hands. What on earth was going on here? What diamond? She'd sold her wedding ring as soon as she'd left Wayne.

Besides, Wayne was in jail. It couldn't be him.

Unless he'd hired someone else to harass her.

Trying to compose herself, she scrubbed her face with her quivering hands. God, she was sick of this. So bloody tired. All she wanted was a life without fear. Was that too much to ask?

The phone rang.

She jerked up her head, stared at the phone. Her palms started to sweat.

The ringing stopped. The answering machine turned on. Her sister's message ended, and the machine made its high-pitched beep.

And then there was heavy breathing.

"Tonight." The single word cleaved the silence, detonating her nerves. The machine clicked off. The tape whirred softly as it rewound.

Her adrenaline surged. Panic wiped out her thoughts. She had to run. Flee. Go somewhere, anywhere, and keep her daughter safe.

She looked at Claire, saw her daughter's lower lip quiver, the anxiety pinching her face. And she knew with dead certainty that she couldn't run. If this was Wayne, he'd only find them again. For Claire's sake, she had to end this terror now.

And if there was one thing she'd learned about her exhusband, it was that he thrived on power and control. He wanted to see her run, plead, whimper with fear. And she'd be damned if she'd play his sick games.

She rose, her knees knocking so hard she could barely stand, and crossed the kitchen to the answering machine. She ejected the tape, slipped it into her pocket and disconnected the phone.

Then she grabbed her purse from the counter and fumbled through her wallet for Detective Martinez's card. She found Luke Montgomery's number instead.

She hesitated. Should she call him? If the letter and phone calls were related to the casino attack, he would want to know.

But her priority was Claire, keeping her safe. Which meant reporting this to the police—no matter what Luke Montgomery might want.

Still, the memory of the skepticism in his eyes made her pause. He hadn't trusted her; that had been clear. He thought she'd sell her story to the highest bidder, even though she'd given him her word.

And maybe she was a fool to care, but there was something sad about a man that cynical, who thought that money always talked. And if she didn't call him now, she'd only confirm his jaded beliefs.

So maybe she should warn him. Maybe she should update him on this latest threat first and then inform the police.

And pray that whoever was watching them did n't see them go.

She met her daughter's frightened eyes, and a frigid pit formed in her gut. Claire was right to be afraid. Because if their watcher learned what she was up to, her daughter would pay the price.

The Las Vegas police were certainly thorough. Three hours later, Amanda still hunched on a folding metal chair in the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police station while Claire dozed on her lap. She'd turned over the evidence, given multiple statements, submitted fingerprints so they could exclude her prints from the note. Now several people crowded around her in the airconditioned room—the detective she'd met in the casino, a petite police officer named Natalie Rothchild, several others whose names she couldn't recall.

And Luke Montgomery. He'd arrived shortly after she had, to her surprise. Now he sat in the chair beside her, the sleeves of his crisp white shirt rolled up, his dark forearms braced on his knees, listening intently while Natalie Rothchild summed up the case.

The police officer tucked her short brown hair behind her ears, then cleared her throat. "All right, then. In light of these developments, I think we have to consider the possibility that the ring isn't lost after all."

"Damn," Luke muttered.

Amanda glanced around at the circle of grim faces, confused. "What ring?"

Detective Martinez shifted his bulky frame in his seat. "We had a murder case recently—a woman named Candace Rothchild.You might have read about it in the news."

"Yes." She'd read up on the sensational case after she'd met Luke.

"She was Natalie's sister," he added.

"Oh." Amanda shifted her gaze to the other woman. "I'm sorry."

Natalie nodded. A pained look shadowed her eyes. "The night she was killed, Candace was wearing a diamond ring, a family heirloom we called the Tears of the Quetzal. We never found it, so we assumed it was lost. But we'll have to rethink that now."

Amanda frowned. "You think my note is related to that ring?"

"I think we have to consider that possibility, yes."

"But I just moved here. How could I possibly be involved?"

"That's what we need to find out. And it might not be related. But we can't rule it out, especially since the man who held you up demanded a ring. And that note is similar to the one my father received." She turned her head, spoke to one of the men. "Get that note to Lex Duncan at the FBI, will you?"

Amanda's head whirled. She gaped at the nodding men. Surely they were joking. She was tangled up in a diamond theft? It didn't make any sense.

She gave her head a sharp shake, tried to recall the facts of the case. From what she'd read, Luke had hosted a jewelry convention in his casino a few weeks back. Celebrities from around the globe had attended the glitzy event—including the casino heiress Candace Rothchild. Later that night she'd been murdered, her ring stolen. The priceless diamond ring—rumored to be under a bizarre curse promising the wearer love at first sight—had never been found.

Luke had originally been a suspect, although he'd later been cleared of the crime. She cut her gaze to his harsh profile, noted the rigid line of his jaw. No wonder he'd come here. He was as involved in this case as she was.

She pressed her hand to her throat, still unable to process it all. It was bad enough to think Wayne could be watching her. But a vicious murderer…

"There's something else I need to tell you," Natalie said gently.

Dazed, Amanda jerked her attention from Luke. The other police officers rose and began filing out. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Your exhusband was released from jail last week."

Shock rippled through her. She tightened her hold on Claire. "But…Detective Martinez said he was in jail."

Natalie made a face. "I'm sorry. There was a computer glitch, and some of the data didn't get entered on time. Wheeler reported to his parole officer in Maryland yesterday, though, so you shouldn't have to worry about him."

"You don't know Wayne." He was clever. Cunning. And he knew her habits, her fears. She closed her eyes, felt her skin go cold. Her worst nightmare had just returned.

Natalie stood. "We've increased our patrols in your neighborhood, and we'll have someone monitor the house tonight in case anyone goes near that mailbox. We've also told Maryland to alert us if Wheeler breaks his parole."

It wouldn't do any good. Wayne had gotten around those measures before. A tight ball of terror knotted her gut.

Natalie shook her hand. "We'll be in touch."

"Thank you," she whispered, knowing there wasn't much else the police could do. She'd learned that fact back East.

"Claire, honey." She nudged her daughter gently to wake her. "It's time to go."

She roused her daughter, helped her to her feet, then left the room on quivering legs. Behind her, Luke and Natalie began to talk.

So Wayne was out of jail. He would come after her, if he hadn't already. He'd promised her he would. And if that weren't enough, she had a killer on her heels, demanding a ring she didn't have. Hysteria gurgled inside her. Could her life get any worse?

And what on earth should she do? Clutching Claire's small hand, she exited the building, then squinted in the blinding sun. She had to go home, warn Kendall. But then what? Should she leave town?

Would it do any good? Running from Wayne was hard enough. How could she flee an enemy she didn't know?

"Mommy," Claire said, her voice anxious.

Realizing she'd been squeezing Claire's hand, she relaxed her grip. "Don't worry. Everything's okay," she lied. She knelt, ignored the pavement sizzling her bare knees, and gave her daughter a hug. She buried her face in her hair, inhaled her littlegirl scent, held her small, warm body tight against hers.

But a terrible dread lodged inside her, a wild, desperate fear that seeped like ice through her bones. How could she protect her daughter from a killer? She'd never felt more terrified in her life.

But she had to succeed. Claire's life was inherhands. She opened her eyes, smoothed the silky strands of hair from her daughter's cheeks, then eased her grip and rose.

"How about macaroni and cheese for dinner?" she suggested. This was definitely a comfort food night. "And then we'll watch a movie, maybe *Mary Poppins.* Would Brownie like that?"

Claire whispered to her bear, then held it up to her ear. Her big blue eyes met hers. "*The Little Mermaid,* too."

"Sure, we can do that." They might as well watch movies all night. No way would she fall asleep knowing a killer was lurking outside. She grabbed Claire's hand and stepped off the curb.

"Amanda, wait." She glanced back, surprised to see Luke Montgomery hurrying toward her, his black hair glinting in the sun.

He caught up to her and stopped. He glanced at Claire, then leveled his whiskey-brown eyes at hers. "We need to talk."

"Sure." Although she couldn't imagine what he'd have to say. She motioned to her green Honda Accord across the lot. "I parked in the shade. Why don't we talk over there?"

"All right." She started across the lot with Claire, and he slowed his pace to theirs. Without her high heels on, she was more aware of his height, the power in his fluid stride.

She slid a glance at the hard male planes of his face, that sexy, carnal mouth. His eyes captured hers, and a sudden tension sparked between them, igniting a flurry of nerves. She quickly turned away.

They stopped in the patch of shade beside her car. He leaned back against it, folded his muscled arms across his chest. His gaze caught hers again, touching off another rush of adrenaline, and she forced herself to breathe.

"What kind of security system do you have?" he asked.

"On the house?" She frowned, led Claire around the car to the rear passenger door, hoping the distance would quiet her nerves. "We don't have one, just locks on the windows and doors."

"That's what I figured." He turned to face her, propped his forearm on the roof, drawing her gaze to the black hair marching across his tanned arm. "If that killer's out there, you need better protection than that."

Her stomach clenched. "I know." But it would take time to get a security system installed—time she didn't have.

"I have a place you can stay," he said, and she raised her brows. "A house. It's in a gated community on the north side of town. It has an alarm system, round-the-clock security guards. You'll be safe there."

She stared at him over the roof. He was offering her the use of his house? "That's nice of you, but—"

"I'm not doing it to be nice. Not entirely." The edge of his mouth quirked up. "You and your daughter need protection. I don't want any bad publicity right now. If you're in a safe place, the attacks will stop. It solves both our problems.

"The house is comfortable enough," he continued. "It has a pool, tennis courts, a home theater. If there's anything else you need, you can let me know."

Comfortable enough? He had to be joking. She'd seen pictures of the mansion in the tabloids. It put a sheikh's desert palace to shame. "Comfort isn't the issue."

"Then what is?"

She made an exasperated sound. "Well, for starters, I don't even know you."

He lifted one broad shoulder in a shrug. "You'd hardly see me. I spend most of my time in my penthouse. And it's only until they find this guy."

"Even so…" She shook her head, opened the car door for Claire. It was impossible, crazy. "What if the tabloids find out? Won't that make things worse?"

"I doubt they'll find out. They won't expect it, and I pay my staff not to talk. Although…" He drummed his fingers on the car roof, and a calculating look entered his eyes. "That's not a bad idea. We could spin it, play that angle up. Hell, the consortium might even approve."

"I'm afraid you've lost me."

"If the media thinks we're engaged, it would give them something to speculate about besides the murder. I'd need you to attend a few events with me, though."

"Engaged?" Her jaw dropped. He wanted her to pose as his fiancée? "But…that's ridiculous. No one would believe it. I'm not even your type."

Amusement crinkled his eyes. "They'll believe what-ever story we feed them. Besides…" His gaze dipped, making a long, heated slide over her breasts, and her heart fluttered hard. "I think I know my own type."

"Right." Her voice came out breathless, and her face turned warm. This was nuts. She had to get a grip and control herself before she totally embarrassed herself. "Except that if I'm in the news, Wayne and that murderer will know where I am for sure."

"But at least you'll have better security."

She couldn't argue that. She and Claire were vulnerable right now. She'd even dragged her sister into this mess. But moving into Luke's mansion…

"I appreciate the offer," she said carefully. "I really do. But I'll have to think about it."

His expression turned sharp. "You think I murdered Candace Rothchild? Is that the problem?"

"What? No, of course not." She ducked, helped Claire into her car seat to avoid his scrutiny. Truthfully, she didn't know what to think. According to the tabloids, Luke had argued with the murdered woman that night, and they'd had a tumultuous, romantic past. But the police had cleared him of the crime. And she couldn't imagine him killing anyone, considering how gentle he'd been with her.

But she was a lousy judge of men.

She straightened, flexed her wrist—a stark reminder of just how flawed her judgment was.

Luke's gaze stayed on hers. "I didn't do it. I despised the woman, but I didn't kill her. That's part of the problem, though. If they reopen the case, I'll be back in the news. The police might investigate me again."

"I'm sorry. It's just…this is pretty sudden. I need to think." She closed Claire's door, walked around the car to the driver's side. Luke straightened and stepped out of her way.

"You'd like the house. You both would," he said as she climbed inside. She nodded, closed the door, then rolled down the windows to let in air.

He bent down, putting his face just inches from hers. She tried to ignore the virile beard stubble coating his jaw, the disturbing effect of his riveting gaze. "It's a safe place, Amanda." His deep voice caressed her nerves. "No one will bother you there."

Except him. "Thank you. I really will think about it."

Of course she couldn't accept the offer. It was beyond ludicrous. She'd already moved in once with a man she'd barely known, and that had been a disaster. She couldn't compound her mistakes.

She backed out of her parking space and drove to the nearest exit. While she waited for a break in traffic, she glanced in the rearview mirror. Luke stood by a gleaming black Jaguar convertible, watching her with those arresting eyes.

She shivered. No wonder the women flocked to him. Just being near him had a devastating effect on her nerves.

And he was wrong about the media. Even if she agreed to the fake engagement, they would never buy it. She spotted a break in the traffic and gunned the car, anxious to leave Luke behind. She'd seen photos of his dates in the tabloids—gorgeous, voluptuous women, the kind who wore designer clothes, shoes that cost more than most people's mortgage payment. A-list women who vacationed on exotic beaches and sunbathed on yachts.

Whereas she was a high school history teacher. A single mother with a three-year-old child. And she couldn't forget that fact.

She sighed, changed lanes, then worked her way through the city streets toward home. That was the mistake she'd made with Wayne. She'd been flattered when he'd asked her out, impressed that a rich, charming man had showered attention on her. She hadn't cared about his money, but it had been so darned nice to have someone pamper her for once. All her life she'd worked to put food on the table, to keep sanity in their unstable lives. Wayne had made her feel sheltered, cared for. She'd even admired his selfcontrol.

Big mistake. One she couldn't afford to repeat.

She turned into her sister's street, pushed thoughts of the past from her mind. She neared the house and slowed the car, and every cell in her body tensed. She inhaled, blew out a long, slow breath, trying to stay calm. But what if Wayne was nearby? What if the killer was here? Her knuckles turned white on the wheel.

She pulled into her driveway and idled the car, hardly able to breathe. She scanned the neighbors' bushes and yards, watched for movement around her house. Nothing. She pried her hand from the wheel, hit the button on the remote to open the garage door, checked the street in the rearview mirror.

Everything was fine. No one was there.

The garage door swung open, and she drove inside, her pulse flaying her skull. God, she hated this fear, this constant anxiety, the need to listen, watch, run. She cut the engine and set the brake. Still scanning the garage, she unlatched her seat belt and opened her door.

The side door burst open. A masked man lunged toward her, a crowbar in hand.

She shrieked, slammed her door shut and hit the locks. Her heart rioting, her hands fumbling, she jammed the key back into the ignition. But the man leaped around the car and smashed Claire's window.

Claire wailed. Amanda's heart went berserk.

She cranked the engine, rammed the gearshift into Reverse, shaking so hard she couldn't think. She yanked off the brake, slammed the accelerator to the floor. The car rocketed out of the garage backward, shot down the driveway into the street—and crashed.

Amanda screamed, her voice merging with the din of twisting metal and shattering glass. The car jumped forward from the impact, hurling her against the steering wheel, and she gasped at the sharp jab of pain.

The car rocked backward again, then stopped. The sudden silence rang in her ears. Stunned, she looked up. The man in the garage ran off.

She swiveled around in panic. Claire still sat in her car seat, sobbing, clutching her bear, her face streaked with tears. But she was all right. She was all right. They'd both survived.

But who had she hit? She looked out the rear window. A cop emerged from his crumpled car.

She closed her eyes, rested her throbbing forehead against the steering wheel, ignored the blood trickling down her cheek. The cop banged on her door. She gestured for him to wait.

And the horror of it all washed through her. She'd nearly lost Claire. That man had tried to abduct her. She'd nearly failed to protect her child.

She sucked in her breath and knew she no longer had a choice. Whether she knew Luke or not didn't matter. They were moving into his mansion tonight.

Chapter 4

Luke had a reputation for being ruthless in business—a reputation he deserved. He crushed all opposition, never let emotions interfere with a decision and never lost sight of his goals.

Which didn't at all explain the turmoil now roiling through him, this odd hesitation to involve Amanda in his plans.

He prowled across his sunny patio toward the pool, the Italian tiles warming his bare feet. He watched Amanda steer her daughter through the sparkling blue water, the kid's arms buoyed by inflatable wings.

Bringing Amanda here made sense. She needed security, which he could provide. In exchange, she would lend him an air of stability, help pacify the consortium until they voted on the project next week. It was a logical arrangement, mutually beneficial—vital now that he'd read the morning news.

He scowled, skirted one of the twenty-foot Canary Island palm trees ringing the pool, tossed the offending newspaper onto a chair. He needed her help, all right. His project's success hinged on this plan.

Hell of a time for a crisis of conscience.

She glanced up from the pool just then and shielded her eyes from the sun. "Luke."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Of course not. Come on in." She steered her daughter to the side of the pool.

He dropped his towel on the chair and dove in, then swam underwater to where she stood in the shallow end. He surfaced near the others, shook the water from his eyes. The kid giggled and ducked behind her mother's back.

"Say hello to Mr. Montgomery," Amanda told her.

"Luke," he corrected.

Amanda smiled, her blue eyes warming, and his heart made a sudden lurch. "Say hello to Luke then."

The kid peeked out. "Luke then," she whispered and giggled again.

Luke grinned back and gently splashed her, and she squealed with delight. Claire was a miniature version of her mother with that angel-white hair and big blue eyes. A little shy, cute as hell.

Her mother wasn't cute. She was a knockout. Thick, dark lashes framed her dazzling eyes. Her hair was wet from the swim, slicked back, emphasizing the feminine lines of her face. Water glistened on her lips and shimmered in the hollow of her throat.

He looked at her shoulders, over the tantalizing cleavage bared by the scoop-necked suit. Water lapped over her breasts, bringing them in and out of focus like a desert mirage, tempting him to peel down that con-servative suit, lick the sparkling drops from her skin.

Aware that he was staring, he jerked his mind to why he was here. "I've got news."

Her full lips pursed, and she glanced at Claire. "Let me get Claire settled down for a nap. It won't take long."

"Take your time. I'll swim some laps." He watched her maneuver her daughter to the steps. Water streamed from her shoulders and back as she climbed from the pool. His eyes followed in the water's wake, skimming her naked back, her perfect butt, the taut, creamy skin of her thighs.

She picked up a towel and quickly wrapped it around her waist. The modest gesture amused him, piquing his interest even more.

But it was an interest he couldn't indulge in right now. He plunged back into the water and began counting laps, relying on the exertion to settle his mind. A mile and a half later, his arms and shoulders tired, and the tension pounding in his temples eased. Feeling more controlled now, he touched bottom and waded to the side of the pool.

Amanda waited in a nearby lounge chair. She'd changed, and her snug, sleeveless T-shirt hugged her round breasts. Her hair had dried, and wispy blond ten-drils fluttered around her face. Her shorts bared her elegant legs.

So much for regaining his focus.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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