O'HALLORAN'S LADY

FIONA BRAND

INTRIGUE...

Fiona Brand

O'Halloran's Lady

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World-famous writer Jenna Whitmore has her share of fans. She just never thought one would be out for blood. There’s only one man she can trust, VIP security expert Marc O’Halloran. He left her once without a word, so how can she ask him for help now?

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O'HALLORAN'S
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INTRIGUE...

“So just who is going to be my bodyguard?”

O’Halloran’s gaze locked with hers. Her heart slammed against her chest as he held the door and stepped inside the elevator. As one big hand cupped her jaw, she acknowledged that somehow she had managed to completely misread the situation.

His head dipped. She had a fractured moment to log the masculine scents of soap and skin, the heat blasting off his body. His mouth brushed hers once, twice, then settled more firmly.

Heat and sensation shot through her as he angled her jaw to deepen the kiss. A split second later, O’Halloran released her and stepped back out into the hall.

He hit the close button. “Honey, who do you think is guarding you? I am.”

About the Author

FIONA BRAND lives in the sunny Bay of Islands, New Zealand. Now that both her sons are grown, she continues to love writing books and gardening. After a life-changing time in which she met Christ, she has undertaken study for a bachelor of theology and has become a member of The Order of St Luke, Christ's healing ministry.

O’Halloran’s Lady
Fiona Brand

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To The Lord, who really did renew my strength while I was writing this book.

“Guard me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.”

—*Psalm 17*

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for her patience, expertise, encouragement and grace.
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Prologue

Disbelief and cold fury gripped Branden Tell as he sat in the echoing solitude of a cavernous warehouse. Motes of dust lit by beams of late afternoon sun drifted through the air as he read Jenna Whitmore's latest romantic suspense novel.

The words on the page seemed to swim and shimmer before his eyes. But no matter how hard or how long he looked, the truth he thought had been lost in the smoke and fire and confusion of the past kept stubbornly reforming.

Six ugly letters spelling out *m-u-r-d-e-r.* Black ink on a pulp page: pointing the finger at him.

He broke out in a sweat; his heart was pounding as if he had just run a race. He wondered how much Whitmore actually knew. Given that she had not gone to the police but instead had included the details of his past crime in a novel, he had to assume she probably didn't know much. He was willing to bet she had stumbled on her conclusions by pure, dumb luck.

He blinked rapidly and tried to think. Would anyone else notice the connections Jenna Whitmore had unwittingly made and link them to her cousin's death in a house fire six years ago?

The answer swam up out of the acid burn in his stomach. Marc O'Halloran, the hotshot police detective who had been hunting him with a dogged, relentless focus for the past six years. He would.

Two months ago, almost to the day, O'Halloran had walked into a security firm Branden supplied with alarms while he had been there delivering a consignment. The second he had recognised O'Halloran, he had turned on his heel and left, but he had felt O'Halloran's gaze drilling into his back as he walked.

The close shave had almost given him a heart attack. There was no way O'Halloran could have recognised him, because he had been wearing overalls and a ball cap pulled low over his forehead. He would have looked like a hundred other tradesmen or casual labourers. He had found out later that O'Halloran had been following up on a lead on the fire that had killed his wife and child, checking on who had installed the alarm in his house.

Six years and O'Halloran was still hunting him.

The fear that gripped Branden for long, dizzying moments almost spiralled out of control. He had to think.

No. He had to *do* something.

Snapping the book closed, he found himself staring at the photograph of Jenna Whitmore on the back cover.

She was nothing like her cousin, "The Goddess." Natalie had been blond, leggy, tanned and gorgeous. Jenna was her polar opposite; dark-haired and pale-skinned with a firm chin and the kind of high, moulded cheekbones that invested her dark eyes with an incisive quality he had always found unsettling.

In that instant, a crude solution formed. After years of wondering when he would appear in one of Jenna's books as a hero, or maybe as some interesting secondary character who could become a hero, he had finally made an appearance, as the villain.

He had mostly read all ten books now, even though he hated reading, because he needed to know if Jenna had written about their shared past. He had found out, just before everything had come to pieces, that Natalie had confided to Jenna that she had a secret friend. For years he had been certain that any evidence that he was linked with Natalie had burned along with everything else in the house, but now he had to assume that Whitmore, who had been close to Natalie, could be sitting on some hard evidence. Since Natalie had been crazy about social networking, it would probably be in the form of emails on Jenna's computer.

His fingers tightened on the novel. In all of the books, the hero had never changed. Whitmore had called him Cutler, Smith, James, Sullivan and a whole host of other names, but the name changes

didn't disguise the fact that she was really writing about O'Halloran. The same hard-ass, hero type who had made a habit of ruining Branden's life through the years.

His jaw clenched. O'Halloran had even dated then married The Goddess, the girl *he* should have had.

The distant sound of sirens jerked his head up. For a split second, he thought that it was too late, that the cops were coming for him. He stared a little wildly at the familiar, ordered gloom of the warehouse, and his desk with its neat piles of forms, installation orders and packing notes.

Clamping down on the burst of fear, he strained to listen.

The sirens were receding.

He remembered the fire that, by now, would be a raging inferno. The chemical warehouse would burn for days, soaking up police hours with roadblocks and evacuation procedures. He was safe, for now.

But that didn't change the fact that it was past time he left the country. After the scare two months ago, he had systematically put plans in place: a new identity complete with passport and bank accounts. He had even bought a condo on Australia's Gold Coast. He just needed a little more time to liquidate assets.

He stared at Jenna's face, which, after years of being pretty but slightly plump, had metamorphosed into something approaching beauty. Turning the book over, he studied the cover, his jaw locking. Just to tick him off, the guy they'd put on the cover even looked a little like O'Halloran.

Old rage, fuelled by his intense annoyance that cutting and running was going to cost him big-time, gave birth to a stunning idea. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it before.

If he was going to lose his business and his expensive, commercial property, which he hadn't been able to offload, damned if he would leave Whitmore and O'Halloran feeling like winners. Instead of venting his temper by flinging the book at a wall of boxes filled with the latest generation of security systems and automated gates, he placed it carefully on his desk, checked his wristwatch and sat down at his computer.

He had almost forgotten that tomorrow was the anniversary of Natalie's death.

Once again it was time to prove that he was a lot more intelligent and creative than anyone had ever given him credit for, past or present.

Including Jenna Whitmore and Marc O'Halloran.

Chapter 1

Pleasurable anticipation hummed through Jenna as she slit open a box stamped with the familiar logo of her publisher. Setting the knife she'd used to cut the packaging tape down on her desk, she extracted a glossy, trade-sized paperback: her latest novel. Glancing at the back cover copy, she flipped the book over to check out the cover … and for long seconds her mind went utterly blank.

Swamping shadows flowed over broad, sleek shoulders and a lean, muscled torso. Moonlight glimmered across sculpted cheekbones, a blade-straight nose and a rock-solid jaw. By some trick of the light, for a heart-pounding moment, the dark, molten gaze of the man depicted on the cover, shaded by inky lashes, appeared to stare directly into hers.

Her breath hitched in her throat as her sunny office faded and she was spun back nine years, to the stifling heat of a darkened, moonlight-dappled apartment, Marc O'Halloran and a fatal attraction she thought she had controlled.

Memories flooded back, some bittersweet, others hot and edged and earthy. The clean scent of his skin as he had shrugged out of his shirt, the sensual shock of his kiss. Heart-stopping moments later, the weight of his body pressing down on hers …

Groping blindly for her chair, Jenna sat down. Her heart was hammering and her legs felt as limp as noodles, which was crazy. After nine years, the few weeks during which she had dated O'Halloran—and the one out-of-control night after they had broken up when she had made love with him—shouldn't have still registered. Especially since she had spent more time avoiding him than she had ever spent mooning over him.

More to the point, she had gotten over him. It had taken time, the process had been a lot more difficult than she had expected, but she had moved on with her life.

Taking a steadying breath, she forced herself to dispassionately study the masculine image that decorated the front cover of the novel.

It wasn't O'Halloran. Plain common sense dictated that fact. Like her, O'Halloran lived in Auckland, and the book had been published and printed in New York. The cover model would have been someone picked from an agency list in Manhattan.

By some freak chance, whoever had designed the cover had just somehow managed to choose a model who looked like O'Halloran.

At a second glance, the differences were clear. The model's nose was thinner, longer, and his mouth was fuller. As broodingly handsome as he was, overall he was just a little too perfect. He lacked the masculine toughness to his features that was a defining characteristic of O'Halloran, the remote quality to his gaze that spelled out that O'Halloran was neither gym-pumped nor cosmetically enhanced. He was that breed apart: a cop.

Frowning, she replaced the book back in the open carton, closed the flaps and stowed the box under the desk, out of sight.

Feeling distinctly unsettled, she strolled out to the kitchen and made herself a cup of tea, using the calming routine of selecting a fragrant fruit variety and a pretty mug to put herself back into work mode. The distant sound of a siren almost made her spill hot tea over her fingers and shoved another memory back at her.

The last time she had seen O'Halloran had been from a distance, four years ago, when she had narrowly avoided running into him in town. Dressed in a suit and wearing a shoulder holster, he had been on police business. The grim remoteness of his expression and the presence of the weapon had underlined the reason she couldn't afford him in her life. Maybe her reaction had been a little over-the-top, but after losing both her father and her fiancé to military front lines, the last thing she had needed was to fall for a police detective. Like soldiers, cops bled. More to the point, in the line of duty, they died.

She had seen what being married to a soldier had done to her mother; the separations and the constant fear, the shock when the bad news finally came followed by intense, bone-deep grief.

Less than a year later, her mother had died of cancer. Jenna had read the specialists' reports and listened to the medical experts but that hadn't shifted her inner certainty that what her mother had really died of had been a broken heart.

The final kicker had been when, even knowing the risk, straight out of high school she had gotten engaged to a soldier. Dane had also been her best friend, which was probably why he had slipped beneath her defences. But that hadn't changed the fact that he had died in a hot, sun-blasted foreign country on some covert mission.

A week after it had happened she had finally been informed. In the midst of her grief, somehow the fact that Dane had been lying cold and dead in a hospital morgue for seven days, while she had spent that time shopping and planning for a wedding, had added to her disorientation. She had loved Dane. She should have known something was wrong. Instead, she had been choosing invitations and having fittings for a dress she would never wear. Her own lack of connection to a man she had been prepared to marry had been subtly shocking. It had underlined a distance, a separation, from Dane that she had witnessed in her parents' marriage, and in that moment she had understood something basic about herself. She couldn't live that life.

She needed to be loved. And not only loved, but also to be the cherished focus of the man she chose.

Fingers shaking slightly, a ridiculous overreaction, she placed the mug on a coaster and seated herself in front of her computer.

Maybe her need for a deep, committed love was unrealistic and overly romantic, but she knew her nature. As much as she had wanted to share her life with Dane, she knew now that it would never have worked. She couldn't compete with the adrenaline and danger of combat and undercover missions.

She couldn't afford to fall for anyone who was going to place themselves on the front lines, either militarily or as a civilian.

She refreshed the screen and found herself staring at a manuscript page from the book she was currently editing. A love scene.

Jamming the lid of the laptop down, she strode out of her office and grabbed a jacket. She needed air, lots of it. Stepping out onto her porch, she closed the front door of her house and locked it behind her.

But slamming the lid on the Pandora's Box of her past was more difficult. As she walked, more memories flickered in a series of freeze frames. The undertow of fascination she had felt the first time she had seen O'Halloran. The bone-melting excitement of their first kiss, as his big hand had curled around her nape and his mouth had settled on hers.

Her stomach clenched. Emotions and sensations she had thought long dead flared to life. She felt like a sleeper waking up, her pulse too fast, her skin ultra-sensitive; she could smell more, hear more, feel more. It had been years since she had felt so alive and, with a jolt, she realised that it had been years since she had felt anything much at all.

As a professional writer, her life was necessarily ordered and quiet. She worked long hours to meet her deadlines, and most evenings she went online to chat with fans or reply to emails. A couple of times a year she travelled to conferences and did promotional tours, coinciding with the release of her books. Apart from socialising for business, *cloistered* was the term that came to mind.

At the age of twenty-nine, thanks to her solitary career, and the pressure of work created by the success of her books, she had a gap the size of a yawning abyss in her social and sexual life.

Thanks to an inconvenient perfectionist streak that had seemed to become more pronounced with every year, she had trouble meeting anyone with whom she could visualise having an intimate, meaningful relationship.

As in sex.

Another hot flashback to the night in O'Halloran's apartment made her stomach clench and her breasts tighten. She definitely wasn't a nun, but for nine years she had lived like one. She hadn't set out to be so isolated and alone—lacking almost any semblance of human warmth in her life, lacking the mate she wanted—it was just the way things had worked out.

Or was it?

The feeling of constriction in her chest increased as she examined the extremity of her reaction to the cover of her new book.

She had gotten over the loss of both of her parents; and she had gotten over Dane. The fact that they had never slept together, because he had surprised her by proposing literally minutes before he had shipped out, had meant they had never had the chance at a full, intimate relationship. As much as she'd loved him, in her mind, he would forever remain a part of her childhood and teen years, not a part of her adult life.

For the past few years, as much as she had wanted to find someone she could fall for, marry and have babies with, she hadn't come even remotely close.

As outwardly attractive as her dates had been, there had always been something wrong. They had been either too short, or too tall, or their personalities just hadn't appealed. She had been picky to the point that most of her friends had long since given up introducing her to eligible bachelors.

Now she had to consider that the reason she had never been able to move on to the healthy, normal relationship she craved was because at some deep, instinctual level, O'Halloran still mattered. That in the weeks they had dated—and maybe because he was the first and only man she had ever made love with—in a primitive, purely masculine way, he had somehow managed to imprint himself on her so deeply that she had never been able to open up to another relationship.

She stopped dead, barely noticing the trees that dappled the sidewalk with chilly shade, or the young mother with a stroller who walked past her. It was even possible that in some sneaky, undermining way, she had fallen for O'Halloran because of his dangerous occupation; that the reason she wasn't attracted to a "normal" nine-to-five guy was because her years on military bases had hardwired her to be attracted to edgy alpha types.

She forced herself back into motion again, automatically turning down the street that led to a small park. The sick feeling in her stomach increased as she strolled, along with the desire to bang her head against the nearest wall she could find in the hope that that salutary action might jolt some sense into her.

She felt like she was staring down a long tunnel inscribed with the words *obvious reason for multiple relationship failures.*

Now was not a good time to realise that as hard as she'd tried to bury her past and the attraction to O'Halloran, like the heroine in her book, she hadn't succeeded.

And now it had come back to bite her.

Two hours before midnight, and the clock was ticking….

On edge and gripped by a tense air of expectation, *haunted by a past that had teeth*, Marc O'Halloran, clad in a pair of grey interlock track pants that hung low on his hips, closed the door on his private gym. A towel from the shower he'd just taken slung over one muscled shoulder, he padded through the darkened luxury of his Auckland waterfront apartment, not bothering to turn on lights.

Stepping out on his terrace, he allowed the damp chill to settle around him like a shroud as he stared broodingly out at the spectacular view of the Waitemata Harbour. To one side, the graceful arch of the Harbour Bridge was almost obscured by a wraithlike veil of mist, and the headland that was Devonport, with its naval base and steep streets crammed with houses, glittered quietly.

Below, street-lighting from the busy viaduct glowed through the wrought-iron railing that edged his terrace. The pulse of neon lighting from the busy restaurants and bars flickered garishly in time with the beat of a jazz band, adding a strident, unsettling rhythm to the night.

As Marc stepped back into his lounge, the glass of the bi-fold doors threw his reflection back at him. The scars that marred his right shoulder and his forearms were an unwelcome reminder of the house fire that had taken the lives of his wife and small son six years ago. Luckily, the broken neck, courtesy of the falling beam that had also damaged his shoulder, hadn't required surgery or scars, just months in a neck brace.

Nothing too major, he thought grimly. He had lived.

Walking through to the laundry, he tossed the towel in a basket, grabbed a fresh T-shirt out of the dryer and pulled it on. Minutes later, after collecting a glass of ice water from the kitchen, he entered his study. The view of the port, and the shimmer of city lights, winked out as he switched on a lamp and unlocked his briefcase.

Bypassing the correspondence file from the security business in which he was a partner, he searched out the bookstore bag that contained the novel he had bought during his lunch break.

Hot off the presses, the latest Jenna Whitmore.

With an effort of will, he shook off the miasma of guilt that went with the impending anniversary of his wife's and child's deaths, and the hot burn of frustration that the only crime he had never been able to solve had been the murder of his own family. Dropping the paper bag on the gleaming surface of his desk, he studied the cover with its tense, dark backdrop.

The book was a suspense, but also a romance, not something he normally read, but he had once dated Jenna so, out of curiosity, he had bought her first book.

To his surprise he had been hooked from the first page. Despite her link to his past—one of the links that he had systematically eradicated from his life—Jenna's books had become a guilty pleasure and a deep, dark secret. If the detectives he had used to work with at Auckland Central or his business partner in the security business he now part-owned, Ben McCabe, ever found out that he read romances, he would never live it down.

Automatically, he turned the book over and examined the publicity photo on the back cover. Despite the tension that coursed through him, he found himself gradually relaxing. Jenna, who also happened to be his dead wife's cousin, frequently changed her hair. The constant process of reinvention never failed to fascinate Marc.

This time she had opted for caramel streaks to complement her natural dark colour and a long, layered cut. As modern as the cut was, the overall effect was oddly elegant.

When they had dated, even though it had only been for a short time, he had liked Jenna's hair exactly how it had been, long and soft and completely natural. Although he was willing to be converted by the lighter streaks and the sexy cut, which highlighted the delicate curve of her cheekbones and made her dark eyes look long and unexpectedly smoky.

Settling into a black leather armchair set to one side of the desk, he propped his bare feet on an ottoman and flipped open the book.

The vice-like grip of guilt and frustration, the knowledge that approximately an hour from now, the man who had murdered his family would contact him, slowly eased as he forced himself to turn pages.

Reluctantly engrossed by words that flowed with a neat, no-nonsense economy, Marc ceased to notice the silence of his Auckland apartment and the inner tension that sawed at his nerves.

As the minutes flowed past, he sank deeper into the story, noting that it was her best yet. The hero, Cutler, a detective, had a lot of grit and texture, and the procedural details were right on the button.

The plot reached a crescendo as Cutler and the heroine, Sara, after a series of tantalising near misses, finally, electrifyingly, made it to Cutler's apartment.

Unexpected tension burned through Marc as he was drawn through the passionate interlude. By the time he had reached the end of the love scene, he had ceased to visualise the damp chill of a

rainy afternoon, and instead his mind had shifted to another season, another room, filled with heated shadows and moonlight….

The sound of distant sirens brought his head up, an automatic reaction that, after two years out of the force, he hadn't been able to kick.

His jaw tightened. Thinking about Jenna was crazy. Since his wife, Natalie, and their baby had died in a house fire, Marc had had no interest in another committed relationship. He had enough guilt to process.

Added to that, he hadn't seen Jenna in years and, apart from one unplanned episode *after* they had broken up and following a near accident with a car, they had never made it anywhere near a bedroom.

A vivid memory of Jenna scrambling off the couch they'd ended up sprawled across nine years ago, moonlight flowing over the pale curves of her body, jolted him out of the story altogether. A new tension coursing through him, he put the book down.

Broodingly, he recalled flickering images of her fastening the low back of her dress. The tense expression on her face as she'd searched for shoes and her handbag.

She had refused a lift and waved her cell at him, indicating she had already called a cab.

Marc hadn't pushed it. The fact that they had slept together after they had broken up had underpinned the awkward minutes until the cab she'd ordered had slid into his drive.

The blinding fact that it had been Jenna's first time had added to the tension, although Jenna had brushed it off. He could still remember her quiet assertion that if it hadn't been for the adrenaline-charged moments when Marc had stepped in and saved her from being hit by an obviously drunk driver, what had just taken place on his couch would never have happened.

Marc had had to accept her self-contained approach. He'd been aware that she hadn't liked the fact that he was a police detective or that he commanded an armed first response team, the Special Tactics Squad.

When he'd started dating Jenna's cousin, Natalie had held a similar view. She hadn't liked the long work hours, the seaminess or the danger, and she hadn't liked being closed out of that part of his life.

After the first year of marriage, Natalie had wanted him to quit the force and go back to law, in which he had a degree. His parents, both lawyers, had their own successful law firm, and she hadn't been able to understand why he didn't want to be a part of it.

The argument had been the start of a wedge in their relationship he hadn't been able to mend. When it came down to it he preferred the practical, hands-on approach to justice that police work offered him, rather than the intricacies of negotiating the legal system.

The whoosh of incoming mail on his computer brought his head up. Tension slammed into Marc as he noted the time: eleven o'clock, exactly. He had been so engrossed by the book, and the window into the past it had opened, that he had forgotten the time.

Jaw taut, he strolled to his desk and read the email.

The message was simple. The same message he had received every year for the past five years on the anniversary of the house fire. A fire he had been certain had been started deliberately, an act of revenge by the notorious criminal family he had been investigating at the time.

Catch me if you can.

Cold anger edged with frustration burned through Marc. Although, there was a certain relief in the fact that the waiting was over. Punching the print button, he waited for the hard copy of the taunting message to feed out.

He had never been able to trace the message to an actual person, or prove the message was connected to the crime. Each time he had traced the email to the server, the name and physical address hadn't panned out. The trail had been predictable, a string of stolen identities, mostly deceased

persons, through which cash payments via fake bank accounts had been made. Nonexistent people and random addresses, all added up to a wild-goose chase.

Despite his contention that the house fire that had killed his family and put him in hospital had been a copycat crime committed by someone other than the serial arsonist the police had been hunting at the time, no one had bought into his theory. Since the arsonist had died during a shootout just after he had tried to set a police station on fire, there was no one to question. The supposed perpetrator was dead, the fires had stopped, end of story.

Grimly, Marc filed the message with the others in a heavy manila folder that contained every police or fire department report and newspaper article relating to the fire and the death of his wife and small son.

Maybe he was being obsessive about his hunt for a shadowy criminal. Maybe he had been wrong all along, and the investigative team who had sifted through what was left of his house were right. The psychological reports that had finished his police career were adamant on that point.

Even so, Marc couldn't let go. The two people he had cared about most had died of smoke inhalation when he should have been at home, protecting them. Instead, he had used his free time—the quality time he should have been spending with his family—working surveillance on a powerful criminal family who had slipped the net on his last operation.

Courtesy of the injuries he had sustained getting Natalie and tiny Jared out of the house, he had ended up flat on his back in hospital for weeks. Further months on sick leave while he had waited for his neck and shoulder to heal, followed by reconstructive surgery for his shoulder, had added to his frustration. By the time he had been fit for duty again, the case had been closed.

He was no longer a detective, but he had not dropped the case. Thanks to bequests from his grandparents and a talent for investment, Marc was independently wealthy. Enough so that he had been able to buy in to the security business he presently co-owned and could afford to fund an ongoing private investigation into the case.

When he had finally woken up from sedation in hospital to find that both Natalie and Jared had died, grief and cold fury hit him like a blow. Despite the gloomy prognosis on his fractured neck, he had made a vow.

It was too late to save his family, but he would use his talent for solving crime, which had resulted in their deaths, to bring the man he was certain had murdered them to justice.

He hadn't made a significant breakthrough in the six years he had chased leads and walked down investigative dead alleys. But the murderer who was taunting him would make a mistake, and when he did Marc would be waiting.

It was just a matter of time.

Chapter 2

An hour before midnight, *and the anniversary of Natalie's death.*

Jenna walked through the darkened parking lot of the shopping mall in central Auckland, glad for the casual warmth of jeans and boots and the cashmere coat belted around her waist to push back the chill.

Overhead, thick clouds hid any hint of moon or stars. On the ground, streamers of cold mist rose off damp concrete and wreathed ranks of wet, glistening cars, adding a dismal air to a chilly winter's night.

Behind her, footsteps echoed, the tread uncannily mirroring her own so that at first she had thought the step was just an echo.

Adjusting her grip on the carrier bags, which thumped against her legs with every step, she walked a little faster, although speeding up was an effort. She was tired from a string of late nights and too many hours spent at her computer. From the scratchiness at the back of her throat and the sensitivity of her eyes, she suspected she was also coming down with a virus. The diagnosis was further confirmed by the chills that periodically swept her and the aches and pains that seemed to have sunk into her bones.

She strained to listen behind her and logged the moment the change in her pace put whoever was following her out of sync with her step.

Automatically, her too-fertile writer's brain analysed the tread. There was no sharp tap of heels. The sound was more deliberate, solid, so it was likely the person wasn't female. He was probably one of the young guys she had seen hanging at the entrance to the mall on her way out.

Now that she knew there was definitely someone behind her, the fact that he hadn't either veered off, or walked briskly past, but had chosen to remain approximately the same distance behind and maintain her snail's pace sent a chill shooting down her spine. The farther she walked away from the lights of the mall, the more sinister the trailing footsteps had become.

As she approached an SUV, in an effort to catch a glimpse of whoever was behind her, she slowed and glanced in the wing mirror.

Apart from wet cars and dark, thin air wreathed with mist, as far back as she could see, the parking lot appeared to be empty.

In that same instant, she registered that the footsteps had stopped. Somehow that was more frightening than if she had actually caught a glimpse of whoever had been following her.

Heart pounding, she swung around and skimmed the rows of cars. The background hum of city traffic, the distant blare of a car horn, seemed to increase the sense of isolation in the misty parking lot, the muffling, encapsulating silence.

Somewhere off to the left a car engine coughed to life. She let out a relieved breath. Mystery solved. Whoever had been behind her must have stopped to unlock their car just seconds before she had gotten up the courage to check on him.

Castigating herself for the paranoia that had leaped at her from nowhere, she adjusted her grip on the carrier bags, and continued on toward her car.

She had parked on the far side of the lot, next to the clothing department stores, because when she'd made the decision to do some late night shopping, she hadn't originally counted on buying groceries. Her goal had simply been to get out of her house, away from her office and the memories that, at this time of year, always seemed to press in on her.

Normally a dedicated shopper, happy to price and compare until she found exactly what she wanted, she'd found the items she'd needed too quickly. Unwilling to leave the bright cheerfulness of the mall and the simple human comfort of being amongst people, even if no one bothered to speak to her unless she handed money over a counter, she'd strolled on into the supermarket.

Shopping this late was ridiculous; the task could have waited until morning. But tomorrow was the anniversary of her cousin Natalie's death and she hadn't wanted to do anything as frivolous as buy pretty clothes. Especially since her aunt and uncle, who still struggled with their grief, expected her over for dinner.

Behind her, she could hear the car her "stalker" had climbed into accelerating toward the exit, going too fast. She caught a glimpse of a glossy, black sedan, pumped up at the back, and the flare of taillights as he braked. It occurred to her that the car, an Audi, looked like the same model the villain had used in her latest book, which seemed appropriate.

Annoyance at the casual cruelty of the man, if he really had been trying to scare her, replaced the last wimpy remnants of fear. She didn't normally wish bad things on people, but a sudden, vivid fantasy of the Audi being pulled over and the driver being issued with an offence notice was warming.

Feeling a whole lot more cheerful, she angled across the lot toward her car.

Ahead, a noisy group of young people exited the mall and stopped right next to the shiny new Porsche she had bought to celebrate the release of her book. She saw with relief that they were trailed by a uniformed mall security guard who was keeping an eye on them.

Simultaneously she registered that the obnoxious Audi, which had apparently missed the exit ramp, was now doing another circuit of the lot. Distracted by the kids milling around her car, she sped up. As she did so, she automatically hitched the carrier bags higher and in that instant one of the handles broke and the contents of the bag cascaded onto the pavement.

Staggering a little at the sudden release of weight on one side and muttering beneath her breath, Jenna set the bags down. Luckily the bag that had broken had been filled with packets and cans, not fruits and vegetables. One eye on the kids, who were still grouped around her Porsche, she started retrieving cans, some of which had skittered across the lane.

As she bent to pick up a packet of rice, the throaty sound of an engine caused her to jerk her head up. Twin headlights pinned her. Adrenaline shoved through her veins, momentarily freezing her in place. The black car, which she had momentarily forgotten, was roaring straight for her.

Dropping the rice and cans, she flung herself into a gap between two cars, hitting the wet concrete of the parking lot a split second before the car accelerated past, so close the vibration shimmered up through pavement and hot exhaust filled her nostrils.

Loose hair tangled around her face, Jenna pushed into a sitting position, logging grazed palms that burned, and a knee that seemed temporarily frozen and which would hurt like blazes in a minute or two. Thankfully, her handbag, which had been slung over one shoulder, was on the ground next to her, although the contents, including her car keys and phone, had spilled across the concrete.

"Are you all right?"

The calm male voice jerked her head up. For a split second, heart still pounding with an overload of adrenaline, she saw O'Halloran. The illusion winked out almost immediately since, apart from hair color and a lean, muscular build, the security officer didn't look anything like her long-ago ex.

Although, she could be forgiven the error, she thought a little grimly, as she allowed him to help her to her feet.

The last time she'd had a run-in with a car, nine years ago to be exact, it *had* been O'Halloran who had come to her rescue.

She noted the name on a badge pinned to the pocket of the security officer's shirt and dredged up a thin smile for Mathews. "I'm fine, thank you. Just a few bruises."

And a whole lot of mangled shopping.

While Mathews asked her questions about the near miss and made some notes, Jenna tested out her knee. It hurt and was already stiffening, but at least she could put weight on it. Although, it would be black and blue by morning.

Limping, she began gathering up her things, starting with the contents of her handbag. The rice was history, grains were scattered all over the concrete, but she found the broken plastic bag and stuffed it into another carrier bag, along with other grocery items that had rolled loose.

Mathews collected the bags containing her dress and shoes and insisted on carrying everything to her car and stowing them for her.

As he closed the passenger side door he cast a steely look at the kids, who had drifted farther down the mall and were now grouped outside a café.

"Are you sure you're okay? If you need medical attention we've got a first-aid station in the mall."

Ignoring the burning pain from the scrapes on her palms, Jenna checked in her handbag, found a business card and handed it to him. "I'm okay. The only thing I'd like is the registration of the vehicle, if you can get it."

He tucked her card in his shirt pocket. "No problem. I'll check out the security footage, but with the lights at this end of the lot knocked out by vandals and the mist, I can't guarantee anything."

Feeling increasingly stiff and sore, Jenna climbed into the leather-scented interior of the Porsche although, for once, she couldn't take pleasure in the car. With a convulsive movement, she locked the doors, fastened her seat belt then sat staring at her shaking hands and grazed palms.

No, she definitely wasn't *okay.*

The driver of the black Audi had to have seen her. She had been standing in the middle of the lane, caught in the glare of his headlights, and yet he hadn't so much as slowed down. If she hadn't gotten out of his way she would have been hit. At the speed he had been travelling, she would have been, at the very least, seriously injured.

Maybe she was going crazy, or she'd written one too many suspense stories, but she was almost certain that what had happened hadn't been either a joke or an accident.

Someone had just tried to kill her.

Lamplight pooled around Jenna as, too wired to sleep after the near miss in the mall parking lot, she set a mug of hot chocolate down on her desk and booted up her computer. Sliding her glasses onto the bridge of her nose, she vetoed any idea that she could work on her manuscript. Since she couldn't settle to sleep, it stood to reason that she was way too jittery to write.

Clicking on the mail icon, she decided to stick with the less brain-intensive task of answering emails until she got tired enough to actually sleep. Her laptop beeped as a small flood of emails filled her inbox.

Minutes later, she opened an email and froze. Fighting a cold sense of disorientation, she pushed her glasses a little higher on her nose and forced herself to reread the message that had just appeared in her fan mail account.

I hate your latest book in which you have portrayed ME as the villin. Besides the romance and the hero being unreel (no one looks that good) the villin is not as bad as you're making out, he deserves a medal for not trying to do away with Sara in the first chapter. Take "Deadly Valentine" off the market NOW. If you don't you will regret it.

Jenna drew a long, impeded breath. As chilling as the content was, and the veiled threat, the writer of the email, ekf235, had no particular literary aspirations. He had misspelt *villain* and *unreal* and had committed the cardinal sin of joining two independent clauses with a comma instead of a semicolon. If her editor, Rachel, saw it, she would have a fit.

Jenna sat back in her office chair, her normal determination to see the positive side of every fan letter she received, even if it was scathingly critical, absent. The misspellings and dreadful grammar, the sideswipe about her characterisation, didn't take away from the fact that whoever had written the letter was nutty enough to think she had patterned the villain on him.

Since Jenna had never heard of ekf235, let alone corresponded with him, that claim was highly unlikely.

For long seconds, Jenna stared at the screen of her laptop, and tried to catalogue all of the men she had known through her life, but her mind seemed to have frozen. It was mild shock, she realized.

For the second time in one night.

Hooking her glasses off the bridge of her nose, she sat back in her chair, and rubbed at the sharp little throb that had developed at her temples.

She was tired and sore, despite taking a couple of painkillers and rubbing arnica and liniment into her bruised knee. She shouldn't have started on emails this late. Buying in to the ramblings of an emotionally disturbed person, who didn't have the courage to reveal their real identity, was always a mistake.

Taking another deep breath, she let it out slowly and tapped the button that generated her auto-reply, thanking the fan. A small whooshing sound indicated that the reply had gone.

She glanced at her collage board, which was littered with all of the various materials she had used as inspiration for the highly successful series of novels that had shot her to the top of bestseller lists.

The only photos she had were those of various male and female models, which she'd cut out of magazines over the years to provide inspiration for her heroes and heroines.

Massaging the throb in her temple with fingers that still shook annoyingly, she wondered what O'Halloran would think about the cowardly, threatening email then pulled herself up short. After the episode with her new book cover, then the moment in the mall parking lot, she had decided that for her own emotional well-being, the sooner she managed to cut O'Halloran out of her life, past and present, the better.

Blinking away tiredness, she examined the rest of the board, which was littered with snapshots and pictures of houses, landscape settings and assorted weaponry.

She had not amassed anything much about a villain. As a rule of thumb, she had found that the less that was said about a villain the better. Mystery was far scarier than knowledge and, besides, fans of her stories responded to the hero, not the bad guy.

Picking up her hot chocolate, she sipped and let her mind go loose, a technique she used to help with memory, especially for allowing seemingly insignificant details to surface. She frowned when her mind remained a stubborn blank.

The person who had emailed had claimed that she had used him as the villain, which meant she must have met him at some stage. There was always the danger that, subliminally, she could have remembered and applied characteristics from someone she had known in her past. In *Deadly Valentine*, she had been influenced by a couple of incidents from the past, but she was also aware that those incidents—the delivery of a single rose and a secret online "lover"—were neither new nor unusual elements.

One thing was sure, no one she had ever met, or knew, came even close to the devious fictional criminal who had hunted Sara down in *Deadly Valentine.*

The only character she had ruthlessly drawn from real life was the heroine, Sara, a private investigator whom Jenna had based on herself. Somehow her own persona and single lifestyle had seemed to fit Sara Chisolm even better than they fitted Jenna.

In the fictional world Sara moved in, living alone was a bonus. Although maybe the fact that Sara was a little on the hard-boiled side and far more confident in the bedroom than Jenna could ever pretend to be had something to do with that.

Her finger hovered over the delete button, but in a moment of caution, she decided she couldn't afford to blot the email out of existence altogether. The meticulous filing habit she had nurtured over the past eight years of researching detective and police procedural material for her books was too ingrained. In eight years she had not deleted one piece of correspondence without first obtaining a hard copy, and she was not starting now.

She didn't expect to hear back from the poisonous fan. Her innocuous thank-you email was designed to neutralise unpleasantness, and it usually worked, but that didn't mean she shouldn't be cautious.

She pressed the print button and waited for the sheet to feed out.

The internet provided a forum for a lot of flaky people. Most of them were harmless. The thought that the vague threat in the email could eventuate into an actual problem was something she was determined she was not going to lose any sleep over, but she couldn't dismiss it altogether.

As a writer, she had lost count of the number of times an inconsequential document had proved pivotal in her fictional investigations. Perhaps that was why the email had felt so chilling.

Shoving the hard copy into the plain folder that contained her negative fan mail, and which she kept in the bottom drawer of her desk, she deleted the email.

On impulse, to balance out the unpleasantness, Jenna opened a folder in which she kept all of the mail she received from the technical experts who helped her with research. She selected the file containing all of the correspondence from Lydell88.

As she read through the last couple of emails, the tension that had gripped her faded. Lydell wasn't exactly a shoulder to cry on, but reading his no-nonsense prose was, in an odd way, steadying.

There was nothing to indicate where Lydell88 lived. All she knew was that he was an Auckland cop with considerable experience, and that he didn't mind answering her occasional questions. She had found him by emailing the Auckland District Office. One of the detectives had eventually responded by supplying her with Lydell88's email address.

Generally he supplied precise police procedural information, but over the years he had begun making incisive, relevant comments about her plots and characterisation, indicating that at some point, he had begun to read her books.

His compliments were sparing, but she valued them all the more for that. When he liked something, he was unequivocal about the matter and she basked in the glow for days.

Lately, he had even begun to suggest plot lines she could develop in future books. The ideas were well thought out and stemmed from an intimate knowledge of her characters and an even better understanding of the criminal mind.

However, she was aware that wasn't what gave her the warm glow of delight every time she opened one of his emails.

Over the years, talking with Lydell88 about the technicalities of developing the police procedural side to her stories had, in an odd way, become the closest thing she had gotten to a date that she could actually enjoy, which was strange considering that he was a cop.

She guessed it came down to mutual interests. They both enjoyed the books, she as the writer, he as a reader and researcher. Somehow, those two things had gelled along with a subtle, intangible quality she could only call chemistry, and they had become immersed, together, in that fictional world.

When her editor had holidayed with her last summer, Jenna had allowed her limited access to the file, keeping the more private exchanges to herself. It had seemed too personal to share the conversations they'd had about the romance of the postwar era, or that Lydell88 thought she should try her hand at writing in that period.

Rachel had been riveted, and they had spent the long summer evenings trying to profile Lydell88. And, more importantly, trying to decide what he looked like.

Jenna hadn't received anything from Lydell88 lately. He generally only ever instigated discussions about her latest book, a line in the sand of which she was sharply aware. Early on, she had considered the fact that he could be either elderly or married, but had rejected both ideas. The tone and style of Lydell88's emails suggested he was younger rather than older, and at no time during their discussions had he ever mentioned a partner, or children, so she assumed he was single.

Respecting his desire for privacy, and relieved that there was no pressure for their discussions to be anything more than they were, she limited her contacts by only initiating correspondence when she started a new book and needed to check facts.

She was waiting with anticipation to see what he thought of *Deadly Valentine*, although it was early days since it had only just been released into stores.

Closing down the program and the laptop, she hooked her glasses off the bridge of her nose and set them beside the keyboard. The pleasant glow she had received from rereading Lydell88's last email faded as she noticed her bottom drawer, which contained her negative fan mail, wasn't quite closed.

Nudging the drawer shut with her foot, she collected her empty mug and switched out the lights, but the damage was done. As hard as she tried to dismiss it, the unpleasant threat delivered by ekf235 had rocked her.

Feeling abruptly exhausted, Jenna stepped into her warmly lit hallway and closed her study door. Limping through to the kitchen, she rinsed the mug and placed it in the dishwasher then began her nightly routine of checking locks.

She had bought the roomy old Victorian house a couple of years ago with the royalties from her first six books, and as wonderful as it was, it had a lot of doors. Despite her attempt to remain upbeat, the silence seemed to ring as she walked through the house. For the first time, instead of taking pleasure in the elegant ranks of French doors and tall sash windows, she couldn't help noticing the large amount of glass through which she could, conceivably, be watched.

Despite the luxurious kilim rugs she had strewn on the glossy, kauri wood floors, her footsteps echoed eerily. As she switched out lamps, shadows seemed to flood the large, rambling rooms, sending a preternatural chill down her spine and making her vividly aware that she was very much alone.

Security wasn't an issue, she reminded herself. The property was alarmed and gated and her fence was high and in good repair. A brief glance at the blinking light of the alarm system she'd had installed shortly after she had moved in assured her that the house was secure.

Jenna carried a glass of water up the long, sweeping staircase lined with, admittedly, gloomy Whitmore family portraits. She avoided the dark stares of ranks of long-dead relatives. Lately the sepia-toned record of the past and her lack of current family portraits had become a depressing reminder of the emptiness of her personal life.

It was one o'clock before she finally climbed into the elegant French provincial-style bed she had bought in response to an article she'd read on curing insomnia.

Apparently, there were two keys to getting a good night's sleep: forming a routine and setting the scene for a restful night.

She was hopeless at the first, so she'd decided she could at least make her bedroom look as serene and inviting as impossible. With dark teak wood and white-on-white bed linen and furnishings, her bedroom could have been lifted straight out of a movie set. Unfortunately, that fact didn't seem to make any difference to her sleep pattern, which was erratic.

As she switched off the light she became aware of sirens somewhere in the distance and recalled the current story in the news. Apparently there was a serial arsonist on the loose, a creepy coincidence since six years ago a serial arsonist had been responsible for Natalie's and her baby's deaths.

She stared at a bright sliver of moonlight beaming through a gap in the heavy cream drapes and found herself fixated on the possible identity of her poisonous fan.

She had not been callous enough to use Natalie's mysterious death in her story, but she *had* drawn on the fact that Natalie had had a secret online friend who had sent her Valentine's-style gifts: single long-stemmed white roses and chocolates.

Although the idea that the person who had sent the threatening email could be Natalie's long-ago secret admirer was definitely pushing theory into the realms of fantasy.

It had to be a coincidence that she had received the email on the anniversary of Natalie's death.

Chapter 3

The next afternoon, Jenna drove to the cemetery. The cars occupying almost every space and the large numbers of well-dressed people walking through the grounds signalled that a funeral was in progress.

Gathering the bunch of flowers she had placed on the backseat, she slipped dark glasses on the bridge of her nose and strolled through the grounds. The sun was warm, the air crisp, the sky a clear, dazzling blue. Large oaks cast cooling shade on row after row of well-tended plots.

As she neared the vicinity of Natalie's grave, she noted the lone figure of a man. For a split second she thought it could be O'Halloran. Her heart slammed against her chest then she dismissed the idea. The man was tall, but not tall enough, and on the lean side rather than muscular. He was also wearing a ball cap, something that she had never seen O'Halloran wear.

A large group of mourners moving toward the parking lot obscured her view. The next time Jenna got a clear view of the gravesite, that part of the cemetery was deserted.

She strolled the rest of the distance to the grave, which was already decorated with a wreath of pink roses and a tiny blue teddy bear, which Aunt Mary would have placed there first thing that morning. Blinking back the automatic rush of tears at her aunt and uncle's pain, which, after all the years, showed no sign of abating, she unwrapped the bunch of bright yellow and pink chrysanthemums she'd bought from the local florist, and placed them in a stone vase set to one side of the headstone.

Extracting a bottle of water from her purse, she topped up the vase. Straightening, she stepped back to admire her handiwork, and became aware that she was no longer alone. She spun a little too quickly, wincing as her knee, still stiff and sore, twinged. The plastic bottle bounced on the grass as a large hand briefly cupped her elbow.

A small shock ran through her as she processed dark, cool eyes beneath black brows, clean-cut cheekbones and a tough jaw made even edgier by a five o'clock shadow.

For a split second, even though she knew it was O'Halloran, she had trouble accepting that fact. Six years had passed since she had last seen him up close, and in that time he had changed. His hair was still the same, dark and close-cut, his skin olive and tanned, but his face was leaner than she remembered, his gaze more remote. A scar decorated the bridge of his nose, and his chest and shoulders were broader, as if he worked out regularly, which, given the rehab he'd had to do following his operation, was probably the case.

The rough jaw, oddly in keeping with his long-sleeved T-shirt and black pants, added a wolfish quality that signalled that whatever else O'Halloran had been doing, he hadn't taken the time to shave. A small quiver shot down her spine when she realized that O'Halloran was studying her just as intently as she was studying him, and suddenly, the notion that the large, fierce male looming over her had anything remotely in common with the model who had posed for the cover of her latest book was ludicrous. "I didn't expect to find you here."

Instantly, Jenna regretted the bluntness of the comment, even though it was true. Since Natalie's and Jared's deaths, O'Halloran had almost completely distanced himself from the family, politely declining all invitations. According to her aunt and uncle he seemed to have no interest in visiting the grave. She had certainly never seen him here any other time she had visited, or seen any evidence that he left flowers.

O'Halloran retrieved the empty water bottle and handed it to her. "I visit. I just try to keep out of Mary's way. The stuffed toys are hard to take."

The blankness of O'Halloran's gaze made her chest squeeze tight. For the first time, she saw it for what it was, grasped just how deeply O'Halloran had been affected by the loss of his family. It was etched in his face, in the muscle pulsing along the side of his jaw.

He had not attended the funeral because he had been flat on his back in hospital at the time.

While he was injured, she had worried about him to the point that she had tried ringing him and, once, had even gone looking for him. She hadn't found him. Like a wounded animal, O'Halloran had gone to ground. Months later, he had surfaced but had continued to keep his distance.

Crouching down, she retrieved the cellophane wrap for the flowers and stuffed it in her purse along with the bottle. "I'm sorry, I should know better than to make assumptions."

His gaze touched on hers as she straightened, before shifting to a group of mourners drifting past, sweeping the cemetery, with a mechanical precision, as if he was looking for someone. "You've had your own grief to deal with. The military is hard on families."

She frowned. "How did you know that I came from a military family?"

His gaze was suddenly way too percipient, reminding her of just how seductively dangerous O'Halloran could be. The last thing she needed was a reminder that aside from possessing the kind of dark, dangerous good looks that made women go weak at the knees, O'Halloran had another set of traits that had always threatened to melt her on the spot. He liked women. He was solicitous of and ultra-protective of them, and he didn't seem to have a built-in fear of emotional reactions. Nine years ago, after the near miss with the drunk driver, O'Halloran's offer of a shoulder had proved to be her breaking point.

He shrugged. "Your family didn't tell me, they closed ranks. I checked newspaper records and paid a visit to the military base."

"Why?" The question was blunt and just a little rude. She didn't care. Years ago, O'Halloran's failure to find out the most basic facts about her life, his easy defection, had hurt. In that moment, she realized how much she had deceived herself about him. In her heart of hearts, she had wanted him to come after her, to insist that what they had was worth the risk.

"I was worried about you. You were too closed-off, too self-contained. I couldn't figure out why you should be that way. I needed to make sure you were all right."

And suddenly, that night nine years ago was between them; the stifling heat, the edgy emotions, her shattering vulnerability. On the heels of the discovery that, like it or not, she had been carrying some kind of a torch for O'Halloran for nine years, the conversation was abruptly too much.

Glancing at her watch, she picked up her bag and hitched the strap over one shoulder. "I need to go. I'm late for an appointment." She aimed a blank smile somewhere in the direction of his shoulder. "It was good to see you."

And she wished that she hadn't. After her moment with the cover yesterday, she wasn't sure what she felt for O'Halloran. All she knew was that his memory was a lot more manageable than the man himself.

O'Halloran fell into step beside her, making her tense. "I'll walk you to your car." His fingers slid around her wrist, sending a hot, tingling shock down the length of her arm. He turned her palm up, so that the grazing was exposed. "How did that happen?"

Jerking free, she quickened her pace, wincing again as the movement put just a little too much pressure on her knee. Annoyed, Jenna resisted the temptation to rub the knee. The last thing she needed was to invoke O'Halloran's protective instincts.

Although, grimly, she noted that if she had thought O'Halloran hadn't seen the elastic bandage beneath her leggings, she would be wrong. "Nothing much. As it happens, I had another run-in with a car."

O'Halloran threw her a sharp look, as if he was as surprised as she that she'd touched on a topic that was so closely connected to the hour they'd spent in his apartment making love. But that didn't stop him from firing a string of questions at her as they walked, his voice relaxed and low-key, almost casual, although by the time they reached her car he had mined every salient detail.

"Ticked anyone off lately?"

She found her key and depressed the lock. "Yeah, a fan."

O'Halloran opened the driver's side door, his arm brushing hers as he did so, sending another one of those small electrifying shocks through her. "Are you telling me," he said quietly, "that you think the driver aimed for you?"

Jenna tensed as a replay of the shiny black car heading straight for her at high speed flashed through her mind. "Not exactly, there was no room. If he had swerved he would have hit another car and damaged his own. That's what saved me. I dived between two cars. What bothers me is that he had a long time to see me and he never slowed down."

"It could have been some kid—"

"Playing chicken. I thought of that." Her fingers tightened on the strap of her handbag. "The only problem was it didn't feel like a game."

She took a deep breath. Here was the point where O'Halloran called the men in white coats with the interesting drugs and the padded cell. "Whoever it was, I got the impression he wanted to hit me. Even if he had braked seconds before, he still would have hit me, and he didn't brake."

Instead of dismissing her statement as emotional overreaction, O'Halloran crossed his arms over his chest and seemed content to listen. "And the disgruntled fan? Where does she come in?"

"He," she corrected. "When I got home I found a threatening email."

His expression altered very slightly. Jenna couldn't even say what it was, exactly, that had changed, just that the temperature seemed to drop by several degrees.

Briefly, she outlined the content of the email, omitting her own suspicion that the poisonous fan, aside from being someone from her past, could be somehow linked with Natalie. So far, that part was just a theory, and she didn't want to cause any unnecessary upset. She couldn't forget that O'Halloran had never believed the house fire that had killed Natalie and Jared had been a random arson. According to her aunt, he'd believed that his family had been targeted because he was a cop, and despite leaving the police force, it was an investigation he had never given up.

O'Halloran's gaze settled on her mouth for a pulse-pounding moment. "I'd like to see a copy of the email."

Digging into his pocket, he found his wallet and handed her a card. "You can scan it or fax, or alternatively, drop it by my office."

Battling the sudden warmth in her cheeks and a humming, deepening awareness that was definitely scrambling her brain, she took the card and slipped it into her handbag. The last thing she had expected was that O'Halloran would want any contact with her at all, and the fact that he seemed to want to help her increased the unsettling awareness. "I've deleted the email, but I did keep a print copy. I'll send it to you."

"Did you report the accident?"

"Not to the police. I talked to one of the mall security guys. He was going to check out the parking lot tapes and get back to me."

"What was his name?"

"Mathews."

Another string of questions about the security set-up at the mall and she found herself haemorrhaging more information, including her phone number and email address and eventually handing over Mathews's business card.

She drew a deep breath, feeling suddenly too aware and a whole lot confused. Giving her details to O'Halloran shouldn't have felt like part and parcel of a dating ritual, but suddenly it did. "You don't have to check up on it."

He tucked the card in the pocket of his jeans. "I drive past there on my way to work. It won't hurt to see if Mathews managed to record the licence plate."

O'Halloran held her door as she climbed into her car. The clean, masculine scent of his skin and the faint whiff of some resinous cologne made her stomach clench. Not good!

Stepping back, he lifted a hand as she pulled out of her parking space.

Heart still beating way too rapidly, Jenna couldn't help checking out her rearview mirror. O'Halloran was still studying the mourners gathered in knots and strolling toward cars and she suddenly knew what he was doing at the cemetery.

The dark casual clothes that made him fade into the shadows, the reason there were no flowers.

He wasn't there to mourn; he was surveilling Natalie's grave.

Frowning, Marc watched as Jenna's car merged with traffic.

He had come, as he did every year, to watch the gravesite from a distance and see who visited apart from Natalie's family. Although this year, with a big funeral in progress, the exercise had been a little pointless.

Grimly, he noted that, as with other years, the only bright spot of his vigil had been when Jenna came to place flowers. Now that she had gone, the vigil felt empty.

In point of fact, after blowing his cover so thoroughly, the whole exercise of watching the gravesite was now a waste of time. If the perp had been anywhere near, he would be miles away by now.

Sliding dark glasses onto the bridge of his nose, he turned back to study the cemetery, which was now emptying rapidly. After a few minutes Marc gave up searching for the lean guy wearing the ball cap who had stopped by Natalie's grave.

The man hadn't left anything at the gravesite, or taken anything away; Marc had established that much while he had talked to Jenna. It was possible the man had been seeking out another gravesite and had simply stopped to read the name on Natalie's headstone, but something about him had caught Marc's attention.

Marc was certain he had seen the man before somewhere. He didn't know where or when, but it would come to him.

The moment when Jenna had told him that she had received a threatening email replayed itself, shoving every instinct on high alert.

He didn't like coincidences, and he didn't believe in this one.

There was a connection. He didn't know how, or why, he just knew that in some serpentine way, and after six years, that Jenna held the key to the breakthrough he needed.

Frustration and disbelief held him immobile for long seconds. For years he had meticulously researched every piece of information and evidence connected to both the house fire and the police investigation he had been involved with at the time. He had assumed the motivation for the crime against his family was a revenge attack based on his police work. Now he had to revise that approach.

The thought that the killer had had another motivation entirely was a quantum shift. In his research and briefs to private detectives, he had kept the focus on the criminal family, who were, ironically, because of his personal investigation, now mostly behind bars for a series of other crimes.

He had made the basic error of discounting Natalie's life, and he hadn't factored Jenna in at all. Two mistakes he would now address. He should have examined every aspect of Natalie's life. Jenna, as her cousin and best friend, should have been at the top of his list.

One thing was certain, if Jenna was the key to unlocking the identity of the killer then from now on every part of her life was of interest to him.

The decision to refocus settled in, filling him with a tension that had nothing to do with the investigation and everything to do with Jenna and a past that still tugged at him.

Nine years ago Jenna had attracted, tantalised and frustrated him. When he had found out that she had been an army brat and that she had grown up on military bases here and overseas, she had fallen into context. The ease with which she'd walked away from him when he'd been certain she had wanted him had suddenly made sense. She was used to moving from base to base and never putting roots down. She was used to saying goodbye, and flat out "no." After she had lost a father then a fiancé, she was used to losing, period.

Digging his keys out of his pocket, he strolled toward his truck, which was parked at one end of the lot, out of sight from the main part of the cemetery.

Broodingly he went back over the few minutes he had spent with Jenna. She had been wearing leggings that clung to her slender legs, a hoodie and sneakers, as if she were on her way to the gym.

The clothing was sleek and mouth-wateringly sexy. Like the car she drove, it underlined the changes that had taken place in Jenna's life. Always intriguingly quiet and self-contained, she was now confident and successful, with a sophistication that packed a double punch.

Marc stopped dead as the extent of the attraction humming through him registered.

Damn, he thought mildly. That was something he was going to have to keep a lid on. He couldn't work effectively if he couldn't keep his mind on the job.

Maybe it had been the book he had read last night, and the steamy sex scene, which had shunted him back to the past. Maybe it was just that he was tired of being solitary and alone and his libido was doing the talking.

Whatever was to blame, like it or not, he wanted Jenna Whitmore and, to complicate matters, he was pretty certain she wanted him. He had to consider the likelihood that they would end up in bed, sooner or later.

But first, he had a killer to catch.

Chapter 4

Electrified by the unexpected meeting with O'Halloran, and the taut awareness that seemed to have settled into her bones, Jenna drove to the gym for her usual midafternoon workout. An hour's circuit of exercise machines and weights followed by a shower and she felt physically relaxed. Although the exercise had failed to dislodge the edgy knowledge that kept making her pulse shoot out of control: that, incredibly, despite O'Halloran's low-key manner and cool control, he had been just as aware of her as she had been of him.

When she had finished, Jenna retrieved her bag from her locker, showered, changed and headed for her car.

As she stepped out from beneath the awning that protected the front entrance, her mind still dazedly, sappily fixed on the minutes she'd spent talking to O'Halloran, a scraping sound jerked her head up. She jumped out of the way just as a pot plant came hurtling down from the terrace of one of the apartments over the gymnasium, exploding in a shower of potting mix and terracotta shards on the sidewalk.

One of the trainers, Amanda, a sleek blonde with a lean, toned body, rushed out from the gym. She stared at the splattered remains of what had once been a pretty, trailing geranium. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Jenna brushed soil off one of her shoes. "I'm fine. It missed me by a couple of feet."

Amanda shook her head. "I don't know how it could have fallen. I rent one of those apartments and there's a three-foot wall running along each terrace. The only way anything could fall down was if someone was silly enough to balance a plant on top of the wall."

Stomach tight, chills still running down her spine, Jenna stepped out from the shade into the warmth of the afternoon sunlight and peered upward. If there had been anyone on one of the several terraces directly above her, they were long gone now.

If she had been just a half second faster the pot would have hit her. "Looks like someone was silly enough."

Amanda nudged a terracotta shard with her foot. "What a mess. I'll have a word with Helen. She'll make sure that whoever owns the pot plant knows what happened." She frowned. "You look white as a sheet. You should come inside and sit down, maybe have something to drink."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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