

LINDA
CONRAD

SAFE BY HIS SIDE



INTRIGUE ...

Linda Conrad
Safe by His Side

«HarperCollins»

Conrad L.

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Twinkle twinkle little star. I know where you are. Another threatening note sent to a beloved child star. But this time, the stalker got inside the house. Desperate to protect her young charge, guardian Blythe Cooper is grateful for the tall, strong bodyguard now standing sentinel at their door. Until Ethan Ryan awakens feelings in Blythe she can't acknowledge. The former secret service agent turned bodyguard makes it his mission to protect children. The rules: never make it personal, and everyone walks away alive. Amendment: somehow, someway, keep beautiful Blythe and the little girl out of his heart—and safe by his side.

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A terrified scream stayed trapped in her constricted throat.

Blythe stared at the spot right outside the door where she could swear she'd seen the ghost of a man moving past.

No one there now. It had to have been nothing at all. Just her imagination playing tricks.

Blythe turned. But as she reached the foyer, he moved out of a shadow behind the door and into the light.

Oh. My. God. This must be the stalker. In the house!

Ashley. By now Blythe could actually hear the little girl's screams coming from out behind the house and she needed to reach her. But how to get past the stalker?

Time stopped, even as the alarm kept ringing and sounds of Ashley's voice continued to vie for her attention. But the stranger's stare felt stronger than all of that and it held her immobile. She began counting her own heartbeats as she fought to breathe. Those eyes of his were amazingly calm and penetrating. Cold steel gray, they studied her with dispassion.

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the world of THE SAFEKEEPERS, featuring the Ryans and their family curse. There's a slim chance that the curse can be lifted! But it will take two more good deeds by patriarch Brody Ryan. Time is growing short....

Second son Ethan Ryan has little concern for the family curse. Not being able to have children just makes his life easier. But this charmer will have to face his own demons in order to keep his clients Safe by His Side. He has a lot to learn, and I had a great time putting him through the wringer!

In Safe by His Side, I also continue my exploration of what it means to be a woman. When I began the trilogy, I came up with three traits I thought were representative of the best of womankind: courage, motherhood and love. In this second book, Blythe Cooper must overcome her preconceived ideas of both who she is and what it takes to be a real mother. She thinks fulfilling her job as a child's guardian will take her automatically to motherhood. Ah, if only it were that easy.

I loved taking THE SAFEKEEPERS to the glitz and glamour of Hollywood with this book. Mixing Mexican witchcraft with limos and the make-believe of TV production made for an interesting combination. One I hope you enjoy!

Happy reading!

With all my best,

Linda Conrad

LINDA CONRAD

was inspired by her mother, who gave her a deep love of storytelling. “Mom told me I was the best liar she ever knew. And that’s saying something for a woman with an Irish storyteller’s background!” Winner of many writing awards, including the Romantic Times BOOKreviews Reviewers Choice and the Maggie, Linda often appears on bestseller lists. Her favorite pastime is finding true passion in life. Linda, her husband and KiKi, the puppy, work, play, live and love in the sunshine of the Florida Keys. Visit Linda’s Web site at www.LindaConrad.com.

Safe by his Side
Linda Conrad



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Tashya, with gratitude. You made me better.
Best wishes on new directions.

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Prologue

“You son of a dog!” The witch’s black words rang out in Spanish under a rain-forest canopy on the Veracruz mountainside. “You have murdered my grandchild and banished my child. And your own children dare to join with you on this dark deed. I curse you all!”

The old woman’s words fell like poison darts on the ears of her victims. “Your punishment will match the crime, Brody Ryan.” Black snake eyes watched from treetops and cold stars blinked in the heavens as her voice rang in the night air. “You shall never have the pleasure of seeing a grandchild. From this time forward, each child of yours will be barren. Your family will suffer for the sins of the father. Go to hell!”

The curandera Lupe Ixtapan Delgado slowly climbed down the mountain path from her mother’s house with those hateful words of long ago still ringing loud and clear in her mind. She would do anything to help her grandchildren escape the curses and hexes of her mother, the bruja. For fifteen years Lupe had sought a way of making her mother see reason. She longed to find a way to change the direction of her mother’s blackened soul. The ancient woman neared death, and Lupe didn’t want her to die without seeking God’s forgiveness for the pain she’d wrought.

Yet the reversal of her mother’s curse depended entirely upon another. The man who had committed the original crime must be the one to redeem himself before the curse could be lifted. Lupe had no love for her son-in-law, Brody Ryan. But she loved his children—her grandchildren—beyond measure.

Brody Ryan was the key, and his children’s salvation might still be possible. He’d already managed one good deed and had brought a needy child and its mother to their destiny with Lupe’s eldest grandson, Josh. Two more kind and selfless acts from Brody Ryan, and Lupe’s mother had promised to reverse the curse on the entire Ryan family.

As Lupe wound her way home at the edge of her maternal family’s lake, she swore to keep a careful watch over all the Ryan family. She wished that she could force something good to happen. But when it came to Brody Ryan’s good or bad deeds, he held all the power.

Chapter 1

The evening sky over Beverly Hills grew ever more dull and gray as sea fog rolled across the 101. Soupy haze lent a chilly cast to what had been a warm spring day.

As the old song said, maybe “it never rained in Southern California.” But Blythe Cooper would have much preferred a good thunder boomer to this creepy, opaque veil that uniformly covered palm trees, green grass and brilliant sunsets with its dark and somber mists.

Glancing at her winking computer screen, she tried to ignore the goose bumps running along her arms. She picked up the nearest file folder in preparation to continue her work. But her mind swung back to the murky shadows outside. She missed the old-fashioned, late spring thunder and lightning storms of her South Carolina childhood home. A good storm was exhilarating. It could take your breath away with its power and majesty.

Sighing deeply, she shrugged a shoulder and flipped open her folder. Blythe had long ago decided she couldn’t be happier to have taken this job as tutor-turned-guardian for child star Ashley Nicole Davis—even with the difference in weather. It was the job at which everyday, average Blythe Cooper had potential to be great. A job where her practical intelligence and her dogged eye for details meant she stood out and even excelled in the midst of all the fantasy, beauty and fanfare of the entertainment industry.

Here, she was needed and would be Ashley’s rock in the storm. A solid presence was exactly what Blythe had been born to be, despite her rocky past.

A chilly air draft curled around her ankles and brought Blythe’s head up from the stacks of travel plans and touring accommodations. Was there an open window somewhere? Both Ashley and the housekeeper knew better than to leave a window or a door ajar in inclement weather.

The house had felt especially gloomy ever since forty-year-old Melissa Davis, Ashley’s mother, had been moved. Along with her twenty-four-hour nurses, Melissa now resided in the guesthouse on the other side of the pool, where she no doubt was sleeping off another round of chemotherapy treatments. Melissa would continue living out there for the remaining months—or weeks—of her life.

At some point after her mother passed away, little Ashley would be free to open windows and invite friends over and be as loud as she wanted to be in her own house again. Blythe wished for Ashley’s sake that a miracle would happen and her mother could be cured. However, the most renowned physicians in the country had said there wasn’t any possibility of Melissa surviving her illness.

Life did continue in this house, regardless of the impending death of its owner. Melissa had seen to that. The three other females still living in the house continued to work every day and dreamed of their futures, while Melissa continued to organize everyone and everything to her exacting standards from her deathbed.

According to her mother’s wishes, Ashley would finish two more days of filming on the current season of her television show and then she would leave on the promotional tour for her summer movie. Mrs. Jenson, their housekeeper, would continue cleaning and cooking and taking care of the place as she had since the days of Ashley’s first TV appearance. And Blythe herself would begin taking full responsibility for Ashley’s personal well-being. Melissa wanted things to be that way.

Blythe had agreed to remain as Ashley’s guardian after Melissa was gone. It was a long-term commitment, she knew, but Blythe had been both ready and happy to sign up. She’d grown to love Ashley over the last two years, and she would stand beside her in grief as she stood beside her in all of life.

Tired of the omnipresent depression that seemed to hang over the house, Blythe got up from her desk and went to search for the origin of the draft. She couldn’t imagine where it might be coming

from, but she supposed that seven-year-old Ashley's room might be a good place to check. She started down the long hall.

The house felt too quiet.

By this time of day, the housekeeper usually could be heard downstairs either making dinner or ordering out. As Ashley played in her room, her muffled giggles would dance gaily down the halls. And oftentimes the sounds Ash made as she memorized her lines along with the taped version the director sent over would provide a low-key and happy buzz to the atmosphere.

Not this particular late afternoon. This afternoon, you could almost hear the foggy mists creeping in through unseen cracks. As Blythe reached Ashley's half-open door, chills were already riding down the back of her neck. She eased through the doorway, half expecting to see her little star catnapping on the bed, though Ashley hadn't been interested in taking naps since before she'd turned five.

"Ash?" Nothing. The bed was littered with coloring books and stuffed toys, but no sign of a droopy seven-year-old fast asleep on top of the covers. And the French doors to Ashley's private balcony appeared to be closed up tight, too. So where was the draft coming from? And more important, where was Ashley?

Blythe stepped farther into the room for a closer inspection of the bathroom and the balcony. She needed to keep a closer eye on the little girl now that her mother had become incapable of most personal supervision. Especially now that the child star had begun receiving a few very odd pieces of fan mail.

Didn't it always work that way? Just when things looked darkest, something came along that had the potential for making it all so much worse. Ashley already had been dealing with her mother's illness and the somber reality of it when her guardians had been forced to cut off her Internet and free access to her fan mail because of a series of nasty e-mails and vague threats. Good thing Ashley was one tough kid.

As Blythe walked toward the bathroom, her attention was caught by a flashing dot at the top of Ashley's computer screen. When they'd cut off Ash's Internet, the technicians had set up an intrahouse circuit so that all the computers in the mansion could instant-message one another. But only one computer in the whole place—Blythe's—could still receive and send via the Internet.

To Blythe's surprise Ashley hadn't really minded the change. She'd learned to like having her own personal message system direct to the housekeeper and to her mother. And what made her the happiest was that she still had the ability to play all her video games.

So who was trying to reach Ashley via internal IM now? Was it the housekeeper, wanting Ashley to come down to dinner? Or could it be the girl's mother? And if so, was it something that Melissa Davis would need attending to right away?

Curious, Blythe sidestepped the bed and pressed the Enter button to read the message. There, against a cobalt-blue screen, came a six-line message in bold bloodred.

Twinkle twinkle little star
I don't need to wonder where you are
Come down to me from up on high
I promise you the world and sky
Don't fret, little girl, we'll be together soon
Come to me, Ashley, and I'll give you the moon

Blythe's stomach turned over and her palms grew clammy. This was the same kind of rhyme, done in the same chilling colors and with the same icky connotation, as Ashley had received before. The earlier ones were awful notes that usually ended with disturbing lines, sounding a lot like the

overtures of a pedophile on the prowl. The police hadn't liked the tone of the letters and e-mail, but they'd said their hands were tied until the sender made an overt move.

To appear on Ashley's computer, this particular message had to have originated from somewhere within the house. That seemed pretty overt to Blythe. Someone was here. The evil had broken in despite their efforts to keep it out.

Oh, Ashley, where are you?

Ethan Ryan checked his watch as he kept one hand on the steering wheel of his rental car. He waited with his usual impatience for his sister to answer her cell phone back in Texas while he sat in L.A. rush-hour traffic.

"Where are you?" His sister Maggie was always in too much of a hurry for the niceties. No "Hello." No "How was your flight?" Just get right to the point. But that was okay by him. His own limited patience was legendary. It ran in the family.

"Sitting on the freeway in L.A.," he said grumpily to the baby sister who was, at least temporarily, his boss. "But I've got plenty of time yet. My appointment to meet with our new client isn't scheduled until seven thirty. I called you to double-check on—"

"Ethan, you have to get there now."

"What's up, sis?" Ethan approved of his sister's and brother's efforts to save their deceased grandfather's business by turning his run-down private investigators' office into a security firm that specialized in guarding children. It was poetic justice, if nothing else. That's why Ethan had agreed to use his expertise to help them out. Well, that and the fact that he'd had to leave the Secret Service.

"You didn't move the appointment time up without checking with me, did you?" he blurted, not letting her answer the first question. "We were lucky the plane landed on schedule. This is the big city, Maggie. Not Texas. You just can't schedule things too tight. As it is, traffic will keep me on the freeway an extra—"

"I don't care how you do it, brother. But you have to be at Ashley Nicole Davis's house right now."

"Have you heard something new from her manager? That, um...Grandpa Ryan's old college friend, what's his name?"

"His name is Max Slotsmeyer, as you would know if you'd read the complete info packet I put together for you. And no, he hasn't contacted me."

"Then why should I show up two hours early for a scheduled appointment?" Ethan asked a little too irritably. "I wouldn't do that even if I could sprout wings and fly over this danged inconvenient line of cars. Which, as it happens, I can't."

"Ethan." Maggie lowered her voice to a whisper in order to capture his attention and make him listen. "Remember what Abuela Lupe used to say when she'd have a premonition—about feeling someone's bones walking across her grave?"

Ethan remembered all too well his maternal grandmother Delgado's special words and curses. Her witchcraft was part of the Mexican side of his family heritage. Most of the time he was glad about knowing Abuela Lupe's sayings and spells. But sometimes he wished he'd never learned them. His sister's tone told him this wasn't going to be one of the glad times.

"Yeah, I remember," he told Maggie. "And the connection is?"

"I'm feeling that same thing right now. Don't ask me how I know, but something is terribly wrong at Ashley Davis's house. They need you there. Please do something. You have to go now."

It would do no good to try talking practicalities to his sister. When it came to family witchcraft, spells and curses, they had all learned to accept each other's feelings and wishes unreservedly.

"I'll do what I can," he said in as soothing a voice as he could manage.

He hung up and took a breath before reaching for his briefcase on the passenger seat beside him. There hadn't been a reason to use any spells in a while. Not since the fiasco when none of his curses or magic would've worked to save him from an embarrassing and life-changing incident.

Abuela Lupe had spent most of their formative years teaching him, his older brother and their younger sister the art of being curanderos—Mexican white witches—much to his very American-Texan father's chagrin. But when they'd entered their teen years, they'd begged Abuela to also teach them a few of the spells and curses of the black witches—the brujos.

By then the siblings had learned that hexes and blessings could be muttered with the same breath. And as teenagers, they'd wanted some of the fun of knowing black witchcraft. Ethan's young mind had reeled at the idea of getting any date he wanted with just the right hex, or raising his grade in any class with the proper combination of potions and herbs.

Their grandmother refused their request. According to her, black magic could not be trusted. They'd tried a few spells on their own and were fairly successful. In the long run, however, their immature white and black witchcraft hadn't turned out to be strong enough for everything. The brothers' and sister's magic had failed to make a difference when it had mattered most.

But today, Ethan felt sure he still knew enough magic to cause a break in this traffic jam. Enough of a break, that is, to transport him to his destination in a few minutes instead of hours.

Pulling a finger-size red amulet in the shape of an egg from a secret compartment in his briefcase, Ethan began channeling his powers. He reached into his memory for the right words to use and started an incantation.

Not sure what lay in store for him, Ethan nevertheless knew to trust his sister's hunches. If she felt it was imperative for him to be at Ashley Davis's house now, then his job was to make that happen.

Blythe quietly moved back to her office and picked up her cell phone to call the police. But as her hand hovered over the lighted keys, she remembered how unsympathetic they'd been the last time she'd called them about scary e-mails and letters.

They'd made her promise not to call again unless the threat was real and imminent. Could she swear an intruder was in the house now? She hadn't heard a thing, and the place did have a security alarm that was activated—most of the time. With a seven-year-old in residence, it was difficult to keep a security system set during the daylight hours. Still, there were no sounds at all.

Undecided about her next move, Blythe reached the top of the stairs with the cell phone still in her hand. She looked down the hallway in the direction of Melissa's old master bedroom, but decided she needed to check downstairs for Ashley first. This whole thing could just be a mix-up of some sort and in a few moments she would find Ashley sitting in the kitchen eating chocolate chip cookies.

Could Ashley have written the note herself as a joke? That didn't sound like something Ash would do, but you never knew. The girl did like making up her own poetry. She was a genius at some things, and she tended to be melodramatic at the best of times. Her mother's illness was the worst of times in Ashley's world.

Shaking her head sadly, Blythe pocketed the phone and headed down the stairway. Her best move would be locating Ashley and making sure she was not simply playing a game, since an intruder seemed impossible with the alarm system.

By the time Blythe reached the bottom stair, she had almost convinced herself that the spooky message was some kind of prank. Then she came to a sudden stop mid-thought, certain she had heard a noise this time. She froze in place, listening. Deadly silence was the only thing to reach her ears.

Blythe gave in to a momentary frisson of panic. Had she somehow failed in her responsibility to Ashley? No. Please, no. Refusing to believe that she'd messed up yet again, she set her shoulders and took another step. Before she angered Melissa by calling in the police, only to find Ashley had been acting out her grief by writing that note, Blythe decided her first move had better be to perform a thorough search of the house and grounds.

She headed toward the kitchen. Occasionally Mrs. Jenson gave Ash a treat before dinner. Those cookies, maybe, or a bowl of popcorn. Such things were not permitted according to Melissa's rules, but perhaps Blythe would find the girl trying to be extra quiet while she snuck in a forbidden snack.

Hitting the switch on the overhead spot lighting in the dining room, Blythe sought to dispel the claustrophobic feeling. She ran an uneasy hand through her hair, knowing it was useless to try to contain her noncompliant dishwater-blond curls. Between the humidity and the stress causing her to perspire, this was bound to be a bad hair day. No matter. Her life was filled with bad hair days. And how she looked was the least important thing on her mind at the moment.

Reaching out slowly to press against the swinging door leading to the kitchen, she caught just a hint of movement out of the corner of her eye. Blythe stopped and whirled in the direction of the French doors, which opened onto the terrace that ran around the back of the house. A terrified scream stayed trapped in her constricted throat as she stared at the spot right outside where she could swear she'd seen the shadow of a man moving past.

No one there now. Just her imagination playing tricks.

She let out a sigh. But then, just as her body began to relax, it seemed as though the whole world exploded around her in a whirl of noise. The doorbell rang, the alarm sounded and voices shouted.

Blythe turned and ran toward the front door. As she reached the foyer, he moved out of a shadow behind the door and into the light.

Oh. My. God. This must be the stalker. In the house!

Ashley. By now Blythe could actually hear the little girl's screams coming from behind the house. She needed to reach her. But how to find Ash without leading the stalker to her?

Time stopped, even as the alarm kept ringing. The stranger's stare felt strong and held her immobile. She began counting her own heartbeats as she fought to breathe. Those eyes of his were amazingly calm and penetrating. Cold, steely gray, they studied her with dispassion.

Blythe fought to speak, but no sound came out. She tried dredging up a little anger or indignation, something to hang on to and use in her defense. Still nothing.

The pressure in her chest expanded and she began worrying that she might pass out. But she had to do something. Hold him there to wait for the police and keep him from Ashley. A little girl's life depended on it.

Ethan tried to make sense of everything he was seeing and hearing. When he first arrived at Ashley Davis's house, he'd noticed that the front door was ajar. That looked wrong, and the foggy silence surrounding the place seemed somehow deafening.

He'd rung the bell on the way in, but he hadn't taken two steps inside the door when a big ol' devil wind broke loose. The alarm began sounding. Someone—was that a child's high-pitched voice?—shouted from the back of the house. And now this...this...schoolmarm-looking woman was standing there staring at him as if she were a mouse and he was the cat about to pounce. Well, hell.

"Where's the kid?" he yelled above all the din.

The woman's eyes grew wide, but she didn't make a sound.

"This is Ashley Nicole Davis's house, correct?" He took a step toward the woman. "Are you the housekeeper? What the hell is going on? Why's the alarm going off? And where is Ashley?"

Still nothing came from the woman's mouth. "Right. First we need to turn off that damned alarm." He headed off toward the back of the house and to the spot inside the back door where alarm installers normally placed their keypads.

He strode through the garishly decorated mansion and found the key-in pad exactly where he had expected. Seconds later, he'd used his magic to enter the right code to turn off the alarm. The kitchen phone rang and he picked it up, expecting the call to be from the security company. He was right. He identified himself, gave them the new password that had been prearranged and explained that he was already on the job and would complete a security check immediately. The company

assured him that they had been notified of the change in procedures and about the new bodyguard and said they would stand by.

Ethan didn't waste another minute but started out in the direction of the earlier shouting. Whoever had been making all the noise must've been close to his current location, or maybe just outside the French doors to the pool and terrace. He followed his instincts at a trot, coming out of the kitchen into a wide family room at just the same moment as the woman he'd seen before came racing in from the other direction.

Well, at least she could actually move. Now if he could just be sure she could talk, too...

"Stop where you are," she shouted at him from about twenty feet back. "That alarm will bring the police."

He did a quick assessment. Noted she had no visible weapon but did have a bulge in her dress's pocket that could be a tiny automatic—or more probably a cell phone. She was slightly above average height and slightly over average weight under that rather dowdy flower-print dress. Which meant her figure might be just a little on the lush side for his taste. Her brownish-blond hair ringed her head with a riot of soggy-looking curls, and her brown eyes were still on the wide and frightened side.

Nothing there that was too exciting, except maybe for the determined tilt to her chin. That was totally out of character for the rest of her image, and Ethan decided that one single attribute might be worth a second glance. Later. After he figured out what the hell was going on and found the child.

"Hang on, ma'am," he drawled, plastering on the wide grin that usually bought him whatever he wanted. "I've got it covered. I'm on the job now. But unless you can tell me that wasn't her yelling a moment ago, my first duty is to check on the welfare of Ashley Davis."

The woman turned and picked up a heavy lamp, ripping the cord from the wall. "Stay away from her." She hefted it above her head and moved toward him.

Well, that pretty well answered the question of the weapon in her pocket. But there was no time for explanations.

Making two quick maneuvers, Ethan forced her to drop the lamp. Then he pulled her back against his chest, tightening down on her in an incapacitating bear hug.

"Sorry I don't have time to play games, darlin'," he whispered. "Ashley comes first. So you and I are stepping out these doors right now to see if we can find her."

"Bastard," she hissed.

"Probably," he said, dragging her to the door.

The woman squirmed and kicked him hard in the shins.

Ethan drew in a quick breath at the sharp pain, then tightened his hold—maybe a little more than he should've. He almost chuckled at the sound of her discomfort.

With a grunt of satisfaction, he pulled her even closer. "Make that a definitely."

Chapter 2

Blythe squirmed away from the stalker the moment he dragged her outside the door. She could see Ashley and Mrs. Hansen through the lifting fog at the edge of the pool. With their backs turned to the house, the two were staring out past the pool house and across the wide lawn.

Blythe dashed toward Ash. Maybe the three of them could make a run for the pool house, lock the door behind themselves and call the police. The big lug who'd manhandled her didn't appear to have a gun. She and Ashley and Mrs. Hansen would just need to be faster than he was.

"Stop," the man shouted after her. "Don't any of you leave the patio. It might not be safe."

Blythe spun around at the sound of his voice, putting herself between the stalker and Ashley and facing him down. Too close, she thought. They would never make the pool house before he caught them. But he would have to go through her to get to her little charge.

"Go away. Leave us alone." Blythe pulled the cell phone out of her pocket and flipped it open. "I'm calling the police. You'd better run before they find you here."

"Good idea," he said with a wry grin. "I was just going to suggest calling, too. But first, maybe we should all introduce ourselves and find out what's been going on."

He took a step closer while pulling a flat, wide wallet from his suit pocket. At last Blythe gulped in a long breath and really looked at this man she'd assumed was a stalker. Wearing a dark business suit, a white button-down shirt and a red-striped tie, he looked more like an IBM employee or an FBI agent than a stalker.

"Okay," she said a little more breathlessly than she would've liked. "Who are you?"

"We saw a man," Ash interrupted as she came up from behind and took Blythe's hand. "Through the mist, coming down the balcony stairs from Mama's old room just as the alarm went off." She turned to the housekeeper. "Didn't we, Mrs. Hansen? We both yelled at him, but he ran away." Ash turned again and pointed out over the lawn. "That way."

The stranger went to Ashley's side and Blythe tightened her grip on the child's hand. "Ashley Nicole Davis? I'm Ethan Ryan, your new bodyguard." He knelt to be closer to her level and showed his ID. "Did you get a good look at the man? Can you describe him?"

"Nuh-uh," Ash said, and shook her head. "Too foggy."

Adrenaline draining from her body, Blythe went limp. She let the cell phone slip back into her pocket.

"Her bodyguard?" Trying to adjust to the new reality, Blythe dug deep for a little indignation to replace the fear. "You have a lot of nerve just waltzing into the house and scaring people half to death. There are rules of deportment, you know. Prospective employees ring the front doorbell and wait to be introduced. What are you even doing here at this hour?"

She'd known Max had hired a new bodyguard firm, against her better judgment. But Melissa had wanted them, so they'd been hired. "I thought your firm wasn't sending a man until we left on tour in a few days."

Ashley tugged at her arm while the bodyguard returned to his feet. "Blythe, Max told Mom he'd be stopping by tonight after dinner for our first appointment with the new man. Didn't you hear him say that?"

Shaking her head, Blythe blinked back the tears threatening to undermine her position. With one look into Ashley's wide violet eyes, Blythe remembered how much the child meant to her. What would she have done if the stalker had really gotten to the little girl? Confused and relieved, she was at a loss for words.

"Why don't we all go inside and see if we can straighten this out?" Ethan Ryan asked as he gestured toward the patio door. "In the meantime, I'll call the security firm and have them notify

the police. I doubt that the subject will still be in the area, but the cops should do a thorough search anyway.”

Still embarrassed and unsure of what her next move should be, Blythe took a breath and marched Ash to the kitchen doorway while Mrs. Hansen brought up the rear. The intense bodyguard stopped only long enough to study the door lock and the security wiring, then followed their small parade into the kitchen.

Mrs. Hansen, bless her, began chatting with Ash about dinner as the two of them walked into the pantry, totally ignoring what could’ve been a life-and-death situation. Blythe had a question or two for Ashley, but perhaps it would be better if she let the child have a moment to regroup first.

So...the new bodyguard. She turned, but found that he was still on the phone with the security firm. Waiting for him, she slid down onto one of the chairs at the industrial-size kitchen table. Her shaky legs wouldn’t have held her up another minute.

As he continued on the phone, she took the time to study the bodyguard named Ethan Ryan. Judging by where she’d come to on his on his chest level when he’d bullied her, Ethan had to stand at well over six feet tall. At five-eight, she’d still had to tilt her chin to look up at him. His rich, dark chocolate hair was styled short in an almost military cut save for the suggestion of a curl at his forehead.

He must’ve felt her staring at him, because he turned, shooting her a steely glare while he finished up on the phone. Ah yes, the eyes. A gunmetal gray, those tortured eyes had been what had so captured her attention and made her forget who she was and where she was going when she’d first spotted him by the front door.

Really, he looked good enough to swallow whole, if one was inclined to like the type. And he was exactly the sort of guy Blythe had always fallen for in the past. But not this time. Never again. She was through being used by good-looking men who knew exactly what they did to women.

Just the thought made her mad all over again.

Ethan hung up the phone and tried a smile for the woman whose stare had been burning a hole in his back, but her scowl only deepened. “All right, then. The police will be checking the neighborhood and they’ll send a forensics team over to search for fingerprints and to discover how he gained entrance, but that’ll take a couple of hours. In the meantime, they don’t want anyone to be by themselves.”

When she only continued to stare, he took another tack as he sat down across the table from her. “You must be the personal assistant turned guardian. Uh...I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch your name.”

She lifted that strong chin again. “Teacher turned guardian. My name is Blythe Cooper and I was and still am Ashley’s tutor before I became her guardian. And I—”

“Do you mind running over everything that happened right before I came in? I’d like to get a handle on what went down before the police arrive.”

“Please don’t interrupt. I would be happy to tell you what happened from my point of view, but I think you first owe me an apology for the rough treatment.”

Ethan almost laughed at the prissy tone of voice. Man, this woman was something else.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked as politely as possible.

“No.” She absently rubbed at her arms and Ethan actually experienced a moment’s guilt. “But that’s not the point. Why didn’t you immediately identify yourself? And why did you feel it necessary to break in?”

“The door was open. Standing ajar. I rang the bell, called out and stepped inside to find out what was wrong.” Ethan studied her movements carefully and decided her eyes were the key to what she was feeling. “Why didn’t you answer me when I questioned you at the front door?”

“I didn’t know who you were. I thought...I thought the stalker was inside. After I saw the note, I was—”

“What note?”

“Stop interrupting. Didn’t anyone ever teach you any manners?” Gold sparks shot through those plain brown eyes as irritation colored her expression. Ethan found himself absorbed with the fascinating changes he observed in what he’d originally assumed was a rather ordinary face.

Just as he was about to give her another one of his charm-’em grins to get himself off the hook, Ashley and the housekeeper came back into the kitchen.

“Mrs. Hansen says she’ll make my favorite dinner tonight. Isn’t that cool, Blythe?”

Another more interesting change came over Blythe Cooper then. Her whole body seemed to soften as she stood to talk to the girl. The strict, set shoulders rounded as she hugged Ashley to her body. A smile lit up her face as if it were suddenly Christmas morning.

This wasn’t simply a tutor turned guardian talking to her employer. Ethan hadn’t seen anything like the transformation of Blythe’s demeanor since...since before his own mother had died. It must be a kind of motherly thing he was witnessing. He didn’t know yet how the little girl felt about Blythe, but the woman definitely harbored more than mere obligation inside her heart.

Interesting. And annoying. The simmering anger he’d buried from the day his mother died snuck up on him and left him trying to hide his emotions. Again.

“Are we talking chicken nuggets and French fries?” Blythe teased Ashley in a low, smoky voice that suddenly fueled Ethan’s fantasies in a decidedly non-motherly way.

Well, sexual urges might be one method of relieving his old annoyances and pain. But with the rather dowdy guardian? Maybe he needed a day off instead.

“Yes!” Ashley said in a loud whisper. “And chocolate ice cream with rainbow sprinkles. But don’t tell Mom.”

Blythe moved back a step but still had a faint smile on her face. “Not a chance. Your mother doesn’t need to think about such things tonight.

Blythe slid easily into a totally different tone. “Where were you and Mrs. Hansen coming from when you noticed that man? What were you doing outside the house?”

Ethan’s senses picked up on the subtle change in Blythe’s demeanor. A casual question for the girl’s benefit belied the seriousness of the subject. Blythe’s protective instincts seemed to scream silently from her every pore.

“Excuse me, but where is Ashley’s mother?”

“My mom’s sick,” Ashley told him.

He bent down on one knee again. “I heard that, sweetheart. I’m sorry.”

“They moved her into the pool house this morning. She said she didn’t want to disturb me anymore. But I wasn’t disturbed. I just had to be quiet while she slept. And I had to stay in my room or with Blythe, but only when they were giving her the treatments. It was lots better that way than having her in the hospital all the time.” Ashley’s wide eyes glazed over, but Ethan sensed a strength underneath them that surprised him.

He could think of several more things to ask. About the relationship between mother and daughter. About the relationship between child and guardian. But for the moment he decided to stick to the point.

“So you’d gone out to visit with her when all the noise started?”

Ashley nodded, and Mrs. Hansen the housekeeper spoke up from across the room. “It was my fault, sir. I was running late in bringing dinner out to the nurses and I asked Ash to help me carry the dishes so it wouldn’t take so many trips. I’ll do better when we get the schedule down.”

Ethan straightened up and addressed Mrs. Hansen, making sure Ashley could hear as well. “I don’t see how either of you made any mistakes, ma’am. Ashley ought to be able to visit her mother whenever she wishes without being afraid.

“Do either of you remember anything special about the man you saw?”

“It was like Ash said,” Mrs. Hansen began hesitantly. “The fog was really thick. I only got glimpses of a dark shadow moving down the stairs. If the alarm hadn’t started going off, I don’t think I would’ve noticed him at all.”

“Okay.” Ethan gave her one of his crooked smiles—reserved especially for female clients. “But the police are probably going to ask both of you these same things. If you think of anything at all about the man’s appearance, be sure to tell them.”

“Are the police coming?” Ashley asked Blythe. She began blinking wildly. “Mama won’t like that.”

Blythe went to her again and gave her a hug. “We’ll only tell your mother if we have to. Let’s wait and see what the police have to say. And since Uncle Max is coming by in a little while, we’ll check with him, too, before we say anything to upset her.

“You know that’s the real reason the doctor wanted your mom moved, don’t you?” Blythe added softly. “It wasn’t anything to do with you. She needs to stay quiet and not be bothered by phones or visitors and such upsets. You know, like the stuff that goes on around here most of the time. And it was your mom who decided on the pool house instead of returning to the hospital just so you could visit any time you wished.”

Ashley hung her head and swung her body from side to side. “I know. But maybe if I stopped acting for a while, it wouldn’t be so noisy around here. All the reporters and photographers would go away and leave us alone.”

She glanced up at Blythe and apparently saw an answer she’d heard before. “Oh, I know. Mama doesn’t want me to quit. And I really do love acting. Really. It’s just...”

Ethan’s heart went out to the child as her words ran down. She looked nothing at all like the huge megastar Ashley Nicole Davis. With hair stringing down to hide her face and her chin resting against her chest, she looked like what she was—a lonely little seven-year-old whose mother was dying. He nearly asked why she couldn’t quit if she wanted to, but figured he had better keep his mouth shut. That wasn’t any of his business. His job was to keep her safe. Period.

He turned to Blythe. “I didn’t see any reporters outside when I pulled up. Are they here most of the time?”

Instead of answering him, Blythe kissed Ashley on the forehead. “Don’t worry about anything, honey. It will all work out the way it’s supposed to. Why don’t you stay and help Mrs. Hansen make the supper while I take the new bodyguard upstairs to talk for a minute? Okay?”

“Can I?” The little girl’s face brightened immediately. “I don’t have to go back to my room?”

Blythe whispered quietly to the child for a second and then motioned for Ethan to follow her out of the kitchen.

When they were out of Ashley’s earshot, she explained, “We’re doing our best to keep those terrible tabloid reporters away for the present. As far as they know, there’s nothing newsworthy going on here. We want to keep it that way. The reporters and photographers upset Ashley. And Melissa doesn’t want them to get wind of how bad her illness is just yet, either.”

“Okay.” There was something else behind her words. Ethan had the feeling it was personal, but again, asking wasn’t his job. “Where are we going?”

She started up the wide staircase. “I want to show you something before the police arrive. It’s one of the things we need to keep hidden from the tabloids. And I’d rather Ash didn’t have to see it.”

Ethan dogged her steps up the stairs. He tried cataloguing in his mind everything he’d learned so far but got distracted by Blythe’s generous backside as she climbed each stair above him. His first choice in women tended toward the ultrathin model type. The kind that looked sexy in their push-up bras and little-boy briefs. But he found himself admiring Blythe’s rounded curves a lot more than was appropriate.

Maybe it'd been too long since he'd had any woman. What with his recent "female" problem, he'd not even considered taking someone out just for fun. And thinking that way about this woman, a client and an irritant, would make him too stupid to live.

Hadn't he learned a lesson from the fiasco that had cost him his career? Stay totally professional with the female clients, he chided himself. Professional. Period.

"So, I understand Ashley has received other notes like this one."

Blythe maintained the five-foot invisible barrier she'd erected between herself and Ethan. "Yes. She'd gotten several e-mails similar to this one before we cut off Ash's Internet access. And the same sort of disgusting stuff in handwritten notes, too."

When he just shook his head and checked the computer, she continued. "We've had to hire a fulfillment firm to open Ashley's fan mail and a new business firm to handle all the other mail that arrives. We no longer receive any mail here at the house. And my computer is the only one that can send or receive e-mail."

"The police have copies of the other correspondence?"

She nodded and then folded her arms over her waist to keep herself together. "The notes are the reason Max and Melissa decided to hire new bodyguards. But this one had to have come from somewhere inside the house. It nearly scared the life out of me when I found it."

"I can imagine." Ethan turned his attention to her, and the sensual glint in those gorgeous eyes hit her full blast. "I'm beginning to understand why you were so frightened at seeing a stranger inside the house."

"You have any guesses as to which of the house's computers might have been used to send this note?" His gaze went from sexy to concerned to all business and threw her into another kind of tailspin.

She worked to keep herself from stammering. "Probably Melissa's old computer, the one located in her suite." It had to be. All the others would have been in places too difficult to reach without being seen.

"In the rooms she vacated this morning?"

"Yes." Blythe felt like an idiot. Ethan was so spectacular looking and she was so regular, probably a hundred and eighty degrees from his usual type of women. She'd met a few actors in the course of her job who were as good looking as Ethan, but none of them had ever gazed at her with quite that kind of intensity.

Fighting the urge to fall at his feet, Blythe reminded herself of her two previous failed attempts at finding love with gorgeous, charming men. With a jolt of self-deprecation, she pushed her shoulders back and reverted to her normal, confident attitude.

"I haven't had time to contact the computer gurus to come unplug it yet. Come on. I'll show you."

When she led him into Melissa's old rooms and to her computer setup, Ethan reminded her not to touch anything. Then he asked to see the French doors that went out to the balcony and the stairs leading down to the pool.

He studied the door and the lock without using his hands. "Doesn't look like anyone broke in this way. But someone definitely set off the alarm when they opened this door from the inside without disabling the system. Maybe the police will be able to pull fingerprints from in here."

A chill rode down her spine. Someone really had been in the house with her. And this close to Ashley, too.

What if Blythe had turned to check out Melissa's suite before she checked downstairs—would she have run into the real stalker? The thought clogged her throat for a moment, and then anger took over. Refusing to cower to a stalker's deliberate attempt to paralyze them with fear, she vowed to

start carrying pepper spray or a stun gun in her pocket. She also made a promise that from now on someone would keep Ashley in sight at all times.

Ethan recaptured her attention. “But the alarm wasn’t sounding downstairs and someone had opened the front door. Do you think it might’ve been Ashley and the housekeeper?”

Her gaze slipped to his mouth and her own mouth started watering at the thought of how kissable his lips looked. “Um...no. I’m sure the two of them left by the patio door.” This ridiculous stammering and daydreaming over a near stranger’s sexy appearance simply had to stop.

He nodded thoughtfully. “Zone alarm system. The upstairs wings must be on separate systems but integrated into the main alarm. However, that still doesn’t answer how someone got through the locked front door.

“You’ll need to make a list of anyone who has keys to the house. I’ll have the alarm firm come out tomorrow, change the pass codes and rekey all the doors.”

Ethan reeked of professionalism. But as much as she’d decided Ashley needed a bodyguard, Blythe didn’t want it to be this ultracharming one. She couldn’t wait for Max to arrive so she could demand that he ask the bodyguard firm to send a different man. Ethan Ryan and his sexy eyes simply had to go.

Chapter 3

“He’s a part owner of his family’s investigations and protection business,” Max explained after Blythe told him that she wanted Ethan replaced. “And the best bodyguard available. Until a few weeks ago he worked for the U.S. Secret Service—the presidential detail. They’re the most elite bodyguards in the nation. We couldn’t ask for a better man to guard Ashley.”

“But...” Stuck, Blythe couldn’t manufacture a good enough reason to get rid of the guy in view of this information. She’d wanted to say she could take care of guarding Ashley herself. After all, Blythe felt competent at almost everything where Ash was concerned. But not this time. She certainly could not compete with a member of the elite presidential bodyguard detail.

Max patted her arm as they sat together on Melissa’s huge theater-room sofa. “I’ve known his family for a long time. Since before he was born. His grandfather was an old friend. I’d like to lend my support to the security firm Ethan and his brother and sister are trying to get off the ground. They’re good people. They deserve a shot.

“Look,” Max continued in his gruff but congenial voice. “Ethan may have had a bit of trouble in his life, but as far as I can tell, none of it has been his fault. Maybe you two just got off to a shaky start and can overcome it. What do you say we give him another chance? Ashley needs the best bodyguard available.”

Max Slotsmeyer had to be in his mid-seventies, but he was still every bit as sharp as a row of shark’s teeth. At one time everyone in the business had even called him the Shark. He’d been one of the best entertainment attorneys in the world, but today he had cut his client list down to one. He still managed Ashley’s career, but only because he and his wife were like grandparents to Melissa. They’d taken her and Ashley in when Ash was a baby, after Melissa’s husband had been killed in a car accident. Without Max, Blythe didn’t imagine Ashley would’ve ever made it to megastar status.

Blythe liked and respected Max. In fact, she owed her job to him. When she’d made that hideous mistake about a year ago, Max had interceded on her behalf with Melissa. With that in mind, and especially knowing Max was set on it, Blythe decided to suck up whatever problems she had with Ethan and give the guy a second chance.

“Okay, Max. I’ll try to be more forgiving. It’s not like I’ve never made a mistake, is it?”

Max chuckled. “Good girl. I know you want the best for Ash. We all do. Where’s Ethan right now?” he added in a change of thought.

She shrugged. “I think he’s still out combing the neighborhood with the Beverly Hills police.”

“That’s fine,” Max said as he stood. “I’m going over to visit with Melissa for a few minutes. Maybe I’ll catch him on my way back. If not, make him comfortable here. Give him whatever he needs to do his job.”

Max stood and reached into his breast pocket for the ever-present cigar. Blythe had never seen him light up, but he carried one in his fingers at all times. Apparently old-time Hollywood agents and managers considered expensive Cubans to be part of the uniform of the day.

Blythe murmured her thanks and watched Max lumber toward the patio door on his way to the pool house. Now she had no choice but to find a way of dealing with Ethan.

Ethan worked into the night, setting up the intercom system between Ashley’s bedroom and the guest room located two doors away. With the over-the-phone assistance of the security-alarm firm, he’d reset the alarms on all four zones. Tomorrow at 6:00 a.m. the company was sending a team to rekey the doors and adding an additional security man to guard the front gate.

Ethan’s job description called for him to stick with Ashley. But he was smart enough to know that even children needed a little space. He remembered from his presidential duty that having ever-present security hovering over your shoulder could be just as stressful as a stalker. So he had come

up with the idea of moving the previously unused baby-intercom system from Melissa's master suite bedroom into the guest room where he would be spending nights.

When he plugged in the last of the wires, the first thing Ethan heard over the line was Blythe tucking Ashley into bed. He couldn't make out the girl's words, but Blythe spoke in soft, soothing tones. It surprised him when her husky, low whispers seemed to wrap around his body like a lover's thighs. His skin buzzed with physical awareness and he caught the brunt of shocked awakening straight in his groin. Hell. Where did that come from?

Leaning back in the guest room's overstuffed chair, he fought his response by closing his eyes and keeping one ear out for any trouble. A few reminders of the job he hadn't been all that happy to take in the first place ought to do the trick and bring his body back under control.

Blythe was reassuring Ashley. "We're safe and your mother is getting the best care," she told the child. "You have two more days left until shooting ends for the season. You know what your mother expects. Nothing's happened tonight that should change that."

"But, Blythe—"

"Nuh-uh, honey. It's not time to goof off yet. We'll get a few days free while we're on tour this summer, I promise."

"But I want to spend tomorrow with Mama before we have to leave town."

Blythe tried to convince the little girl that her mother would rather Ashley do her job and live up to her obligations. But the quiet words bothered Ethan. Obligations at seven years old?

At Ashley's continued objections, Blythe's tone began changing from soothing and sexy to stern. It made Ethan think back to times when his own mother had tried convincing him to keep on working at whatever summer job or afterschool chore his father had forced on him at the time. But it was his father's words from those long-ago days that still rang over and over in his ears all these years later.

"You're a worthless bum," Brody Ryan used to tell him. "You'll never amount to a dime."

Thinking back on it now, Ethan had seemed determined to prove his old man right. Before his mother died, he would cut school, get drunk and drive his pickup wildly through the countryside shooting up road signs with a rifle. He'd even dabbled in black witchcraft and tried dope. Anything and everything his father might consider trouble.

But after his mother died in that plane crash, all Ethan could remember being was angry. Mad at his mother for leaving and furious at his father for caring more about the ranch and money than he did for his children.

The last thread to Ethan's wild childhood had been cut about six months after his mother's death when his father packed up their beloved grandmother, Abuela Lupe, and carted her off to his maternal family's ancestral home in Mexico. Lupe's mother, his great-grandmother—the black witch of Veracruz—had promptly cursed the entire family in her anger over the mistreatment of her daughter. And the curse had taken hold. Brody Ryan would have no grandchild. Ethan, his brother and sister would all be sterile from that day forward.

Ethan hadn't really paid much attention to the family curse. His whole life had felt as though it were cursed anyway. What did it matter to him if he couldn't have children? Great. One less worry to slow him down on his way to the freedom of adult life.

When Blythe's raised voice came irritably through the intercom, Ethan focused back on the present. "Enough now, Ash," she said. "You are going to work in the morning as usual, and we will be leaving on schedule for the tour. Period. Now go to sleep."

Ethan shifted in the chair and kicked off his boots, listening as Blythe could be heard checking the child's windows and shutting the hall door on her way out. The woman was simply too serious and demanding to be a child's guardian. Her tone had ended up sounding more like a drill sergeant's. The fact was, Ashley probably deserved a day off after tonight's excitement. Give the poor little kid a break. Her mother was dying, after all.

Annoyed with Blythe again, and with himself for having inappropriate physical reactions to someone he had to work with, he began wondering about Blythe's background and how she'd ended up here. Ethan settled in to wait until the rest of the house went quiet for the night. Until he could recheck the perimeters and triple-check all the alarms. There wouldn't be much sleep for him tonight, but he didn't require much.

As he waited, he decided to review the file on Blythe Cooper that Maggie had sent along with the files on Ashley and Melissa Davis. Ethan's new sister-in-law, Clare, was a real geek when it came to ferreting out background info. She'd been a reporter before she and her son had gone on the run from her ex, and maybe that explained her excellent instincts when it came to digging up important intel. Ethan rather liked his brother's wife and was glad to have Clare both in the family and at work in their new security business.

He opened the report on Blythe and thumbed through the pages he'd only skimmed on the plane ride out here. Blythe Cooper, age twenty-seven, had been raised in a college town in South Carolina by her mother and father, both college professors. Her older brother was one of those child-prodigy geniuses who'd graduated from college at age seventeen and had gone on to do physics research and now drew exterior designs for NASA. Blythe's younger sister also had a high IQ, but her main interest seemed to be winning beauty pageants. Currently, the sister was Miss South Carolina and headed for the Miss U.S.A. pageant.

Quite the family tree for a plain Jane like Ms. Cooper.

Blythe herself had graduated from college, but at a more sedate pace. She'd earned a master's degree afterward in education, had taught elementary school and managed to win a Teacher of the Year award before quitting and coming to California to become Ashley's tutor a couple of years ago.

On the personal front, Blythe had been a studious teenager and had no trouble in school. Well, that seemed right—and about as far from his own background as could be. After college she'd married a Ph.D. candidate whom she'd met through her parents. The two had divorced a few months before Blythe accepted the tutor position.

The pages of Blythe's report ran out there and Ethan closed the file. Not much to go on to explain her attitude thus far. And certainly nothing to explain why the sound of her voice and the tilt in her chin caused him to suddenly become so aware of her. It made him wonder what she'd done besides work since moving to California. Had his sister-in-law missed something important from Blythe's personal life over the last few years? Did this woman have a secret life that would explain why he felt so tense around her?

So far she'd been as annoying as hell to him. But even with that, there was something about her that reached out to him and made him curious. Because he couldn't imagine why he felt the way he did. Blythe didn't look a thing like his normal choice of female companion, and her background didn't appear to have been complicated or demanding. By the sound of that report, she was just what she appeared. Perhaps she'd been born into an extraordinary family, but the divorced teacher turned tutor turned guardian wasn't anything to write home about.

Still...there was something.

Yawning and becoming resigned to working with her regardless of how he felt, Ethan hoped the police would be able to get a line on the little girl's stalker soon so he could turn the job over to someone else and go on to the next thing.

Still not sure the direction the rest of his life would take after this assignment, Ethan was positive of one thing. Working with Blythe Cooper had to be just a short-term arrangement.

Despite the fact she hadn't gotten a whole lot of sleep, Blythe woke up at 5:30 a.m. clear-eyed and ready to face the day. Yeah, and what a great day, with Ashley acting irritable and anxious and with herself having to face the new bodyguard again.

Terrific.

Suddenly grouchy, Blythe headed for the shower. She had lain awake most of the night hating herself for the tone she'd had to take with Ash at bedtime. The child was usually so good and sweet and never caused anyone a moment's problem. But of course that was all back before her mother had moved out to the pool house to die and then refused to let Ashley slack off from work for even so much as one lousy morning.

It wasn't fair. But then life wasn't fair, was it? If life always turned out the way you wanted, then Melissa wouldn't be dying and there would be no stalker to threaten a little girl star—and no need for a bodyguard to drive Blythe right up the wall.

But Blythe reminded herself that the best plan, the only plan, was for her to deal with Ash as gently as possible, and to deal with Ethan from a distance until the threat was gone.

Twisting the water faucets to hot, Blythe stripped and stepped under the spray. Trying not to think of the man, she soaped up and thought of him anyway.

Since the first time she'd seen him standing there in the shadows, Blythe had acknowledged that he must be one of the world's top ten best-looking men. With his firm, solid jawline, the golden skin tone that spoke more of a Latin heritage than his Irish name might suggest and those wicked gray eyes—eyes that seemed to take in everything and could go from charming playboy to dedicated bodyguard in an instant—Ethan Ryan would be a hard man to forget.

As hot water sluiced over her body, carrying soap bubbles down through every crevice, flickers of sexual tension licked across her belly. She absolutely refused to allow any such feelings. Blythe had long ago given up reacting to a pretty face and a charming demeanor. After last year's fiasco, she'd sworn never to let another charmer worm his way under her defenses.

Never again. Her job, her relationship with Ash and her ego would never make it through another disaster as bad as falling for someone like that. Twice in her life was more than enough for any sane woman, thank you.

She twisted off the water and began towel-drying her hair. Going about the business of getting dressed for the day, Blythe tried to regroup so she could manage to face Ethan without letting him find any cracks in her facade.

Since Ash's series production company would be shooting exterior shots for the last time today, Blythe decided to pull on a pair of jeans and a cotton sweater. After wrestling with the wild tangles on her head for a few minutes, she finally gave up and pulled it all back off her face with a fuzzy rubber band. Not a particularly flattering look for her she knew, but practical and easy.

With a slow, deep breath, she drew herself up and felt ready for anything. Until she stepped out of her room and stumbled at the surprising sight of Ethan, awake and dressed and standing in the hallway as though waiting for her. Bracing a hand on the wall, she had to take another deep breath before she could speak.

Leaning back against the threshold to Ash's room, he stood with his arms folded, his chin set and those gray eyes watchful. Ethan didn't so much as move an eyelash when he spotted her. With hair still slick from shower dew, a freshly shaven face and his chambray shirt sleeves rolled halfway up his arms, the bodyguard looked every bit as dangerous as a German shepherd guard dog. More so, because of what the sight of him did to her libido.

"What are you doing?" she demanded in a stage whisper. "Is something wrong or are you just being extra careful? Ash can't be in that much danger inside her own room."

With movements slow and deliberate, Ethan took her elbow and stepped two yards down the hall before he turned to speak. "Everything was quiet in there until about ten minutes ago. From the sounds of things, Ashley is up and moving around and may have been using her computer. It's my job to be extra careful until the doors are rekeyed and a guard is in place on the gate. I'm here in case she needs anything."

"You think the stalker might've left another one of those messages for her?" The thought made Blythe's skin crawl. "It wouldn't be possible unless he got into the house again somehow."

Ethan's jaw clenched. "No, that's not what I think." The intensity of his stare made her feel itchy and vulnerable. But her job wasn't the only one on the line here, so she straightened her spine and lifted her chin as she got ready to let him have it.

Before she could open her mouth, he seemed to settle for a shrug. "Why don't you go on in and check Ashley's computer? See for yourself."

Everything inside Ashley's room seemed perfectly sound. The girl was in her bathroom, brushing her teeth and getting ready for the day. The note still blinking on the computer screen had come from her mother, reminding Ash of the day's shooting schedule, what she should wear to the studio and that she should pay attention and do whatever the new bodyguard told her to do.

Blythe gritted her teeth. The irritation she automatically felt because of Melissa stepping onto her turf must be set aside. Blythe knew this note was nothing more than a last desperate grasp for the parental control that Melissa realized was slipping through her fingers for good.

Blythe was still plenty annoyed over Ethan's earlier smug arrogance, and also that sensual glint in his eyes when he looked her way. But she didn't want any of that to cost her the job she loved.

Vowing to stop letting him get to her, Blythe helped Ash get ready. At the last moment she found the day's script pages stuffed under Ash's bed, put them in her briefcase and then managed to grab them both a glass of OJ on the way out. Despite Blythe's annoyance and her growing foul mood, she let Ethan usher them through the front door when the studio limo arrived to take them to the back lot.

This was going to be one hell of a long day.

As the limo pulled away from the Davis mansion's cul-de-sac and headed toward Sunset Boulevard, a man huddled behind the wheel of his five-year-old Ford down the block and watched. Hidden beneath thick bougainvillea and oleander in the driveway of a neighbor who was out of town, the man took no notice of the morning's sapphire-blue sky or the sweet, romantic scent of orange blossoms perfuming the Southern California air.

He'd seen enough to give him several new directions to follow. He had slowly worked at setting this plan in motion over the last month or so, and every detail needed to be perfect for him to get what he wanted.

Last night's "stalker" note and the commotion that had followed had actually seemed to be accomplishing just what he'd hoped. Then a few hours ago he had been disappointed when the police left after only a cursory search. That kind of reaction wasn't nearly good enough. They'd given up too soon. He would need to ramp up the tension.

But his plans were taking shape. The goal was in sight.

Chapter 4

“Wow!” one of the production assistants whispered loudly as the group of young women standing at the crew’s catering table all turned to stare. “Someone get me a camera. Anyone have a cell phone handy? That dude is seriously yummy. Who is he?”

Immediately two cell phones appeared, one having been pulled from someone’s short’s pocket and one unbelievably slipped out of a bra, and both started snapping shots in a fury. Amazing how those phones had been so handy, since the director had banned cells from the set. Blythe cringed and ducked her head.

It had been a long morning, just as she’d predicted. Ash had fussed and squirmed all through makeup, and uncharacteristically hung back when called to the set. Now the little girl had gone to work with her vocal coach, whom she loved, and Blythe had taken the opportunity to have some badly needed coffee.

She finished pouring herself a cup and tried not to be embarrassed by Ethan Ryan being the center of attention. Although, in black jeans, a black tee and the gray suede jacket that he’d changed into before they’d left that morning, he was seriously yummy looking. He stood by himself about ten yards away from the table, with his feet spread at attention and hands behind his back, silently waiting for Ashley. If Blythe dared to deny knowing him, eventually the truth would be found out. So she decided to join the gossipers.

Clearing her throat, she hoped to switch their attention in another direction and off the man. “He’s Ashley Davis’s new bodyguard. His name is Ethan Ryan.”

All four women turned to stare at her. She had never before been the focus of their attention. In fact, she wasn’t sure they’d ever noticed her at all. The idea that the charming bodyguard could make such a splash with these sophisticated movie crew types made her nervous. But she had to be careful what she said.

Blythe needn’t have worried. Ashley was the last thing on their minds.

“Where’d he come from?” the grip assistant with the long auburn hair asked.

“What’s his background?” the twentysomething script coordinator and the continuity assistant asked at exactly the same time.

The prep tech, who Blythe had always thought looked like an older Lindsay Lohan, took her time while she studied Ethan again. “I’ve never seen him before. He’s definitely never been anybody’s guard on my sets. I would’ve noticed a man who looked like that. No question. Holy moly, is he hot! Has he ever been in the business?”

“Um, no.” Blythe had to say something to make all the speculation stop. “I don’t think so. I understand he recently left the U.S. Secret Service. The president’s detail.”

“Really...” It was the script coordinator, whose name on the set ID tag she wore said Amber Sugarman, who seemed most curious. “My cousin is an administrative assistant in human resources at the Service. She went over there from Treasury right before the changeover to Homeland took place. She says all the guys on the president’s detail are a big flippin’ deal. Why’d he quit?”

Blythe shrugged. “I have no idea.”

But her gaze swung naturally in his direction as she said it—just in time to see him bend over to pick up a wayward piece of paper. To her utter humiliation, she found herself secretly checking out the view of him from behind.

“Hmm,” Amber began thoughtfully. “Maybe I’ll e-mail my cousin and see what she knows about him.”

Blythe couldn’t think of anything to say. All of a sudden she wanted nothing more than to find out about Ethan’s background herself. Afraid to appear too curious around these women she didn’t know very well, Blythe casually tilted her head in an I-don’t-care manner.

She even managed a laugh, but it sounded hollow to her ears. “Not sure he’s worth that much trouble. But if you find out anything terribly interesting, let me know. Ashley is my responsibility, after all. I guess it would be nice if I knew more about the people she’s working with.”

Amber looked down her nose at Blythe, though she probably stood two inches shorter. “Oh, sure. You don’t think he’s hot at all? Ha! Come off it, girl. Anybody would have to be dead and buried not to go panting after that dude. And you get to work with him all the time.”

The conversation came to an abrupt halt as the set coordinator buzzed all assistants back to work. Cell phones magically disappeared and plastic coffee cups and leftover almond danishes got pitched into trash cans as everyone went their own ways.

Actual filming wouldn’t start for another half hour, but Blythe had no intention of hanging around until Ashley was called. She really wasn’t interested in spending time alone with Ethan—not now or in the future. Not with the way he was forever staring at her. And the way his gaze made her body turn all itchy and tense. It was bad enough that every time she turned around he was always right there.

So let him be the bodyguard. “Ethan,” she called out. “I’m going over to Ashley’s trailer to work on schedules. Think you can take over the job of making sure she’s back on the set when the director calls for her?”

“I suppose I can manage,” he answered wryly and with a big wink.

Damn man. He could charm the panties off the nuns. Waving a hand in acknowledgment but afraid to open her mouth for fear of what might come out, Blythe turned around—and ran.

At the end of the shooting day, Ethan pushed out ahead of Ashley but kept her in the protective circle of one arm as he guided her toward their waiting limo. Blythe walked beside him, chin down and with her computer case held in front of her chest like a shield. Meanwhile, a small group of young girls waited at the nearby gate, autograph books waving in their hands as they screamed Ashley’s name.

He’d decided the series television business was damned hard work. Hours and hours of hanging around being bored, punctuated by a few minutes of pure terror when the cameras rolled. How could a seven-year-old be expected to put up with such crap day after day?

At least tomorrow was the last day of shooting for this season. Ashley would have to survive it for only twenty-four more hours.

By the time they arrived at the limo, Ashley was dragging. He literally had to pick the child up off her feet and place her on the backseat. Then he stood aside to let Blythe enter.

Instead of climbing inside, she leaned in to talk to Ashley. Ethan didn’t mind the wait. The view of Blythe’s backside kept him pleasantly occupied.

At first glance, he’d thought the woman a little too well rounded for his taste. But with another look, he found himself paralyzed, caught in the pure fascination of watching the way her buttocks tightened under her jeans. His imagination quickly took him to a quiet place where he could wrap his hands around all that fullness. If things went his way from there, next he would lift his hands slowly to her breasts, testing and teasing the ripe flesh under her plain beige sweater.

Stumbling back a step, Ethan fought for composure. He hadn’t been this turned on by just the sight of a woman’s back end since his teenage years. Was he fantasizing only because she seemed so different from his usual type?

Luckily for his equilibrium, Blythe pulled her head out of the car and looked up at him. Their gazes locked, and instead of the cold and self-possessed attitude he usually saw, her eyes danced with the ghost of a smile. A jolt, electric and sharp, smacked him in the gut.

Mercy. Why hadn’t he ever before noticed that her eyes were the same color as pale golden tequila with tiny shots of green liquor blended right through the irises?

“I want Ashley to lie down and rest on the way home,” Blythe told him. “She’s exhausted. I’m going to be finalizing our tour plans with the studio’s travel agency on my computer in the front seat. You stay back here with Ash and keep an eye on her.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Blythe’s eyes changed back to hard, shooting him a withering look as if to say, I am the boss, jerk off. And don’t you forget it.

But neither of them was stupid enough to say anything out loud.

Blythe climbed into the front passenger seat, immediately opened her wireless laptop and began to work. Ethan slammed her door hard enough to make a statement, then slid in across from Ashley in back and signaled the driver they were ready to roll.

Five minutes outside the studio gates, they found themselves stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Ethan kept an eye on the cars surrounding them, but he didn’t want to appear too nervous for Ashley’s sake.

“Looks like it’ll be a long ride. Are you going to take a nap like Blythe said?” He’d asked only because as she sat there staring at him, her shoulders were drawn up tight and her mouth had turned down in a frown.

“Only babies take naps. I am not a baby. I’m a star.”

Okay, hot stuff. Just what he needed. Another cold, self-possessed female. And this one was only seven. Terrific.

But she didn’t resemble a self-possessed star at the moment. As he studied her, Ethan began to see signs of her distress. Her feet absently kicked the seat. She’d slunk down low, fidgeting with her jacket. And her eyelids drooped as though she was fighting to keep them open.

Without giving it much thought, Ethan swung himself around and sat on the long bench beside her. “You know, I have a sister, and you remind me of her when she was your age. Stubborn little one. She’d get herself so wound up that she couldn’t sleep at night.”

“Where is your sister now?”

“Back home in Texas. She’s all grown up. Still stubborn, though.”

Ashley continued to stare at him. He’d been using his lady-killer grin on her, but she never cracked a smile. He spotted the dark circles under her eyes.

“Well now,” he hedged. “Maybe you just need the personal Ryan touch. That was the only thing used to help Maggie get to sleep.”

The little-girl star narrowed her eyes at him. “What’s the personal Ryan touch? Blythe says I shouldn’t let anybody touch me unless it’s for acting.”

“Now, that’s real smart, darlin’. You pay attention to Blythe. But I didn’t mean a physical touch.” He inched away from her on the long, plush seat-bench to make her less nervous. “Why don’t you take off your shoes and put your feet up? I’ll sit over here and tell you stories about me and Maggie and my brother Josh. That’s the way my grandmother used to do for us. If you want, you could put your head down and close your eyes for a few minutes. Not like a nap or anything, mind you. Just so you can listen better.”

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