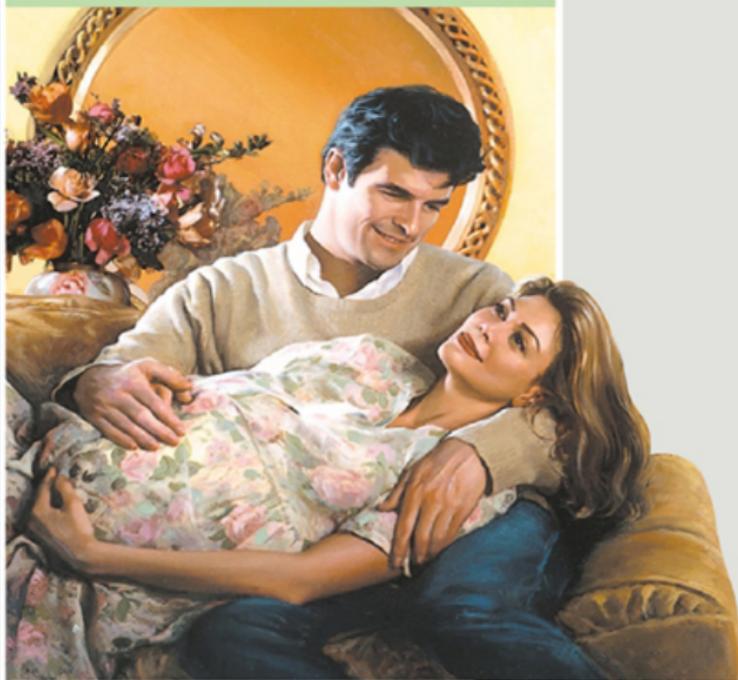


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A M E R I C A N  R O M A N C E ®

Man Behind the Voice

LISA BINGHAM



Lisa Bingham

Man Behind The Voice

Аннотация

His face was the last thing she'd ever seen...Determined to locate the accident victim he'd comforted as her eyesight waned, Jack MacAllister told himself he only wanted to know that she was all right. But when he found Eleanor Rappaport again, he knew he couldn't fade into the shadows this time. She was alone and blind—and pregnant! Eleanor's life had become a lonely struggle—until a stranger's soothing words pierced the darkness. Why did his oddly familiar voice make her heart beat faster? On the bring of motherhood, Eleanor thought she needed space. But maybe she needed Jack more....

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“Your hair,” Eleanor whispered.

“What color is your hair?”

Despite the fact that her voice sounded far too needy in her own ears, she had to know the entire picture. She had to see him.

“Dark brown.”

Like molasses. Like his voice.

“Your eyes?”

“Dark brown.”

She fought the burgeoning awareness filtering through her veins, filling her with a languid heat. It wasn't right to be responding this way to a volunteer. It wasn't in the least bit businesslike.

But, dear heaven above, she was beginning to form an image of him in her head, which wouldn't go away. The clarity of her imagination was strange and disturbing, as if somewhere, somehow, she'd seen him before....

Dear Reader,

Welcome to another joy-filled month of heart, home and happiness from Harlequin American Romance! We're pleased to bring you four new stories filled with people you'll always remember and romance you'll never forget.

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Warm wishes,

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

Man Behind the Voice

Lisa Bingham



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To Danilyn.

Thank you for teaching me to see with new eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Bingham is a resident of Tremonton, Utah—a rural farming community where the sounds of birds and the rustle of wheat can still be heard on hot summer evenings. She has written both historical and contemporary romances and loves spending time watching her characters grow. When she isn't writing, she spends time with her husband on his three-hundred-acre farm and teaches English at a local middle school.

Books by Lisa Bingham

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE

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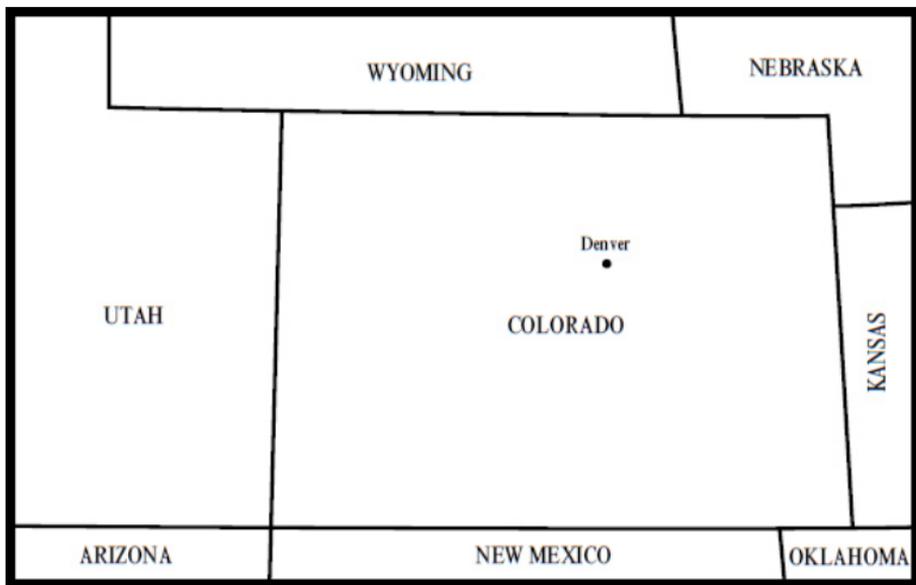
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Prologue

Jackson MacAllister groaned, his body pounding with a thousand aches, the worst of which seeming to center over his left eye. Inexplicably, his mind stumbled through a dense emotional fog, while his eyes stared at...

At what?

It took several long moments for Jack to realize that his face had been pressed into something soft. A balloon?

No.

An airbag.

In a sickening rush, he was inundated with memories. For most of the day, the weather had been cold, with the windchill factor causing temperatures to drop to well below freezing. Jack, who had been working with a filming crew near Estes Park, Colorado, had been eager to finish his assignment and begin the long drive to California.

With the road ahead of him and weeks of difficult stunt work behind him, Jack had been making good time out of the canyon. Traffic was sparse at eight in the evening. The weather had long since chased most of the skiers away.

Jack had been whistling softly to himself, enjoying the hot coffee he'd taken with him from the commissary and the soft music drifting from the speakers of his brand-new pickup truck. But then, Jack had topped the rise and taken a blind curve.

As soon as he focused on the scene awaiting him in the valley below, his good mood vanished. Silhouetted in the headlights of another car, he saw a three-car accident blocking the road in front of him.

Immediately, Jack's instincts kicked in. Years of stunt driving for films made his actions second nature. He'd swiftly applied the truck's antilock brakes, steering well away from the accident should he overshoot his mark. But just when he'd begun to believe he had the situation under control, the truck hit a patch of black ice and...

Jack winced, remembering the horrible screech of metal, the exploding whoosh of his air bag, the grinding explosive sound of his car colliding with the others. And then a scream.

A scream.

In an instant, his mind cleared and Jack was suddenly galvanized into action. Ignoring the aches and pains of his own body, he grappled with his door handle, all to no avail. The impact had dented the panel to a point where nothing short of the "Jaws of Life" would open it.

Reaching behind the bench seats of his pickup, he grasped a toolbox. Flinging open the lid, he removed a small metal awl. By placing the tip against the window and applying pressure...

Bam!

The pane shattered, spraying him with tiny chunks of glass. Tucking the awl and a small first-aid kit into the deep pocket of his jacket, Jack carefully slid through the aperture, assessing the

scene that lay before him.

A delivery truck was evidently the first vehicle to hit the ice, skidding sideways across the road so that it was hit in turn by a large sedan, and then a smaller compact car.

Jack's heart thudded painfully in his ears as he saw the damage his much larger vehicle had made to the tiny car. "Donormobiles" One-Eye Sullivan, Jack's co-worker and friend, called the small compact cars. The diminutive vehicles were great on gas mileage and kind to the wallet, but in a high-impact crash they provided only a minor buffer between the driver and an oncoming car.

"Is everybody all right?" Jack shouted to a pair of figures who were beginning to emerge from the sedan.

"I think so," an elderly gentleman called back.

Glancing behind him at the hill to ensure no other cars were about to hurtle toward them, Jack made a sweeping wave to the couple. "Get off the road and away from oncoming traffic."

"What about the other drivers?"

"I'll see what I can do. I need you to watch out for oncoming traffic and let me know me if you see any headlights approaching. That's about the only warning we'll get."

"I'll whistle at the first sign," the white-haired gentleman said as he took his wife's arm and hurried her toward the side of the road. "Come on, Martha. There's a good girl. We'll climb those rocks there so we'll be out of the way."

A movement from the direction of the delivery truck caught Jack's attention.

“Are you all right?” he shouted to the driver.

The man was awkwardly cradling his arm against his chest, and even in the gleam of the headlights, he looked abnormally pale. Jack would bet the man had broken something during impact.

“Fine. Just a...bump.” He climbed from the driver’s seat and jumped to the ground, hissing in pain. In his good hand, he held a set of reflectors and a dozen flares. “I’ll just go mark the road to warn off any approaching cars. I’ve...” he sucked in his breath for a moment, waited, then continued “...I’ve called dispatch and... 911. We should have some help here shortly. Go ahead and check that little car. I thought I heard...a scream.”

With a hiss, the first flare was lit, flooding the wreckage with a macabre reddish glow.

Movingly gingerly, Jack managed to crawl over the twisted wreckage of the compact car. To his horror, the wind shifted at that moment, bringing with it the overpowering scent of gasoline. Too late, Jack saw that a puddle of the liquid was forming beneath the mangled vehicle.

He opened his mouth to call to the driver, but the man was already halfway up the hill and there was no time to waste.

Scrambling to the far side of the car, Jack peered into the interior. The driver was slumped over the wheel, her long hair spilling around her shoulders. It was obvious from the condition of her own door that she had been attempting to get out of her car when Jack’s truck had veered out of control. If Jack had plowed

into her a few seconds later...

Not wanting to think of the possibility, Jack rapped sharply on the passenger window.

To his relief, the woman moved, turning to gaze at him with wide-eyed confusion.

“I’ve got to get you out of there. Now. Are you pinned down in any way?”

She shook her head, then winced, gingerly touching her forehead where blood was pouring from a gash next to her hairline.

Jack yanked on the passenger door handle, to no avail.

“Cover your face with your arms. I’m going to break the window.”

As soon as she’d done as he asked, Jack angled his own head away, then pressed the tip of the awl against the window. Again, in a seeming explosion of glass, the window dissolved. Seconds later, he was reaching through to the woman in the car.

“Can you crawl out? Your gas tank is leaking and I’d feel safer if we could get you out of there as soon as possible.”

A wave of panic raced over her features, and as she stared at him wide-eyed, Jack noted that one of her deep blue eyes was slightly more dilated than the other. To a man who surrounded himself with carefully staged “accidents” as a living, he knew that it was a bad sign. Head injury.

“N-no. I’ve just got a bump.”

“Careful, then. We don’t know if you’ve injured your neck.”

“No. It doesn’t hurt.” She rolled as if to demonstrate. “It’s just my head. I banged it on the window frame.”

Inching onto her knees, she crawled over the gearshift. As soon as he was able to reach her, Jack slipped his hands beneath her arms to support her and gently lifted her from the car. But when she stumbled as he tried to set her upright, he swung her into his arms and held her against him like a child.

Her body was slight and slim, offering him no resistance—a fact that frightened him even more. She had tucked her head into the hollow of his neck. Against his own, her skin felt cool and clammy. He could see the color leeching from her face and knew she was going into shock.

Hurrying as quickly as he dared, Jack carried her well away from the scene of the accident. Laying her on a patch of bare, frozen grass, he ripped off his coat. After taking the first-aid kit from his pocket, he wadded the heavy down jacket into a ball and wedged it under her feet, elevating her legs as much as possible. Then, dragging his heavy sweater over his head, he knelt beside her, draping the wool over her torso.

“Y-you’ll be cold,” she whispered, her teeth already chattering from shock and the chill of the wind.

He shrugged, doing his best to pretend that wearing little more than a T-shirt in the gusting wind was no big deal.

“I’m fine. Right now, I’m more worried about you, Miss...”

She licked her lips, squinting up at him in the darkness. “Eleanor. Eleanor Rappaport.”

“Well, Eleanor. How’s the head?”

“Hurts.” She squeezed her eyes shut, blinked then opened them again. “I must have banged it on the side of the car when I tried to get out.” She frowned. “But then, I already told you that, didn’t I?”

Jack felt a twinge of guilt, knowing that it was because of his truck slamming into her that she’d been injured at all.

“Does anything else hurt?”

She shook her head. “I’m really...fine. Don’t know why...I feel so...shaky.”

He took her hand, squeezing it. “Don’t you worry. You’ve got a nasty goose egg beginning to swell over one eye. You’re bound to be a little woozy.”

Releasing her hand for just a moment, Jack tore open the first aid kit. Selecting a pre-moistened towelette, he swabbed the gash. To his relief he found that it probably wouldn’t require stitches.

Working as quickly as he could, he cleaned the area, then applied a thick gauze bandage. Then he touched her forehead again. She was cold. Cold, clammy and so very, very pale.

Her eyes suddenly opened. She blinked, squeezed them shut for a moment, then peered at him again.

“So blurry.”

Jack felt his mouth grow dry. “You can’t see?”

“I’m having trouble...focusing...on things.”

Since the fact evidently agitated her, he touched her cheek, then took her hand.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve probably got a concussion or something. A little rest and you’ll be fine.”

“You never...” she murmured, her voice faint and somehow fragile “...told me...your name.”

He squeezed her fingers. “Jackson. Jackson Mac—” He broke off, his head lifting. From far away he heard the faint wail of sirens.

“Hear that?” he said. “They’ve already sent someone to help. In no time at all, you’ll be safe and snug inside an ambulance.”

But when he searched her face for a sign of relief, he saw instead that she was gazing at him wide-eyed, a look of sheer horror spreading over her features.

“Jackson? Jackson!”

“Shhh,” he offered gently, calmly, even as his heart thudded in his ears and the wailing of the sirens grew louder and louder, scraping nerves already raw from the night’s events.

“I’m here, Eleanor,” he said, wondering if she were about to lose consciousness. Instead, as he bent low, he realized that her eyes were open, but they weren’t tracking him. She stared at him blankly, huge tears beginning to well up and spill down her cheeks.

“Jackson, I can’t see,” she cried, softly at first, then louder, the sobs tearing at his heart. “Jackson! I can’t see!”

Chapter One

Six Months Later

Jackson MacAllister bolted upright in bed, his own shout echoing in the darkness of the hotel room.

Breathing heavily, he dragged his fingers through his hair, trying to calm the fierce pounding of his head.

The dream. It had come again—as it always did when he was tired or feeling under the weather.

Or recovering from a nasty concussion.

Wincing, Jack swung his legs over the edge of the bed and turned on the bedside lamp. His body throbbed with the aftereffects of injuries he'd sustained on the job that day and the dregs of his dreams, causing his head to ache until he thought his skull would split with the pressure.

Standing, he padded into the bathroom. Under the harsh glare of the overhead light, he shook four aspirin from the bottle on the counter, then gulped them down with a glass of water from the tap.

Only then did he begin to relax.

Willing himself not to think of the dream or the woman who had seemed so real, so vulnerable, he moved to the windows. Pulling the heavy curtains aside, he peered down at the pre-dawn glow seeping over the Lincoln Memorial in the distance.

It had been nearly a week since the stunt car he'd been driving

had flipped end-over-end during a staged high-speed chase for the film adaptation of the bestselling techno-thriller ...Savage Justice. The scene had been choreographed and reshot three times in the first month of production, but since the director had spent only a quarter of a million dollars more than his budget had allotted, he'd decided to celebrate his good fortune by spending another fifty grand expanding the final chase scene.

Jack grimaced at the irony of the whole situation. Naturally, the director had decided that the footing showing Jack's accident was "mar-r-r-velous"—as if Jack had planned to roll out of control and finish the take upside down next to a broken water hydrant. If Jack hadn't immediately been rushed to the hospital, he would have grabbed the director by the collar, pinned him against a wall and chastised the man for moving a camera crew into the middle of the road—unannounced. As it was, Jack had still been in the emergency room when he'd received the news that the filming was finally—finally—over.

His anger at the director hadn't eased with the announcement. If anything, Jack's ire had increased—to the point where he'd made an effort to ignore the man so that he wouldn't say anything politically incorrect. Jon Palermo might be an idiot, but his films were spectacular, and Jack enjoyed the creative freedom and lucrative budgets that came with a spot on Palermo's crew. In the meantime, he planned to avoid Palermo.

Which was why Jack was booked on the next afternoon flight to Los Angeles. Once he'd returned to California he could put

this whole miserable week behind him.

As if of its own volition, his mind quickly strayed away from all thoughts of Palermo to the nightmare that had awakened him.

Eleanor Rappaport. Why did the memories of that night, that woman, still continue to haunt him?

But even as he asked himself the question, he already knew. In the months since the accident, Jack had thought about Eleanor more than he would care to admit. He couldn't seem to banish the image of her lying next to him, gripping his hand, and crying, "I can't see!"

Again, the words shuddered through him like an icy finger touching his heart. He often found himself wondering what had happened in the intervening months. And if she'd ever regained her sight...

He shook his head as if to clear it of his thoughts, then regretted the action when a slicing pain shot through his head.

The time had come to put the memories of that night behind him, he told himself fiercely. After all, Eleanor Rappaport was a stranger to him. Other than those few minutes at the scene of the accident, he had never seen her again.

But he'd tried, a little voice reminded him. He'd brought a huge bouquet of daisies to the hospital where Eleanor had been taken, only to discover she'd been transferred to another facility.

Sighing, Jack stared out at the jewel-like glow of the historic buildings clustered around the glassy reflecting pool. Maybe the pressures of the job were to blame, but lately the dreams of that

night plagued him even more. The details seemed sharper and Eleanor's panic seemed that much more real.

If only he could assure himself that she was all right. If only he knew if she'd regained her sight. If he could see her one more time...

No. He couldn't even think such a thing. She was a stranger to him. And those few moments they'd had together didn't give him the right to interfere.

But she wouldn't have to know.

The moment the thought raced through his head, he tried to push it aside, but it returned with even more force.

If he could somehow find her, he could tell at a glance if she was happy, healthy...

And whether or not she could see.

Again, he tried to bury the idea. He was out of his mind to even consider such a thing.

But he had the time.

And he needed to know.

Already he found himself making plans. Denver. If he could change his flight to Denver, he could—

No!

Again every logical bone Jack possessed insisted that he stop and think about the repercussions of such an action. Eleanor Rappaport was a stranger. He had no business barging into her life unannounced.

But another part of him, one that reacted on instinct, had taken

control of his body. He was filled with impatience, a sudden hunger to see her again.

Numbly he turned, making his way to the closet. Slowly at first, then with greater urgency, he began throwing his belongings in his suitcase, banging drawers as he went.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

The door to the adjoining room squeaked open and a stoop-shouldered man glared at Jack.

Jack grimaced, realizing too late that he'd been making enough noise to wake Ira Sullivan, a fellow stuntman and mentor—known to his friends as One-Eye because of the patch he wore over his left eye, the result of a stunt-related accident that occurred years earlier.

“Denver!”

“Denver?” the man echoed incredulously. “What the hell for? I thought we were taking a four o'clock flight to L.A.”

“I've got to see someone there.”

“Who?”

“Eleanor Rappaport.”

One-Eye's mouth gaped. He'd heard all about the accident and was clearly flabbergasted that Jack intended to see Eleanor again. He opened his mouth intending to argue, then closed it again.

“I'll just gather my things. Heaven only knows what kind of trouble you could get into with that concussion. 'Pears to me you're going to need someone to ride shotgun with you on this little adventure.”

“THERE YOU GO, Ms. Rappaport.” The bus driver’s rich-as-chocolate voice was accompanied by the squeal of brakes and the pungent scent of diesel fumes. “You be careful on your way home, y’hear? It’ll be slippery out there with all that rain.”

“Thanks, Burt.”

Eleanor awkwardly pushed herself to her feet, automatically smoothing the folds of her jumper over the protrusion of her stomach.

Two months. Two more months and she wouldn’t have to complete the odd contortion of movements it took to wriggle out of her seat and stand on a moving bus.

Finally gaining her balance, Eleanor automatically curled her hand around the iron bar overhead and made her way to the rear doors, her body leaning backward to adjust to the rocking of the vehicle.

Once she was positioned in front of the exit, she hooked an elbow around the vertical pole and used her free hand to unfold the red-tipped cane she’d slipped into her purse, taking great care not to bump the strident bicycle bell attached to the handle. Burt came unglued if she rang it on his bus. Something to do with the fact that he was an ex-police officer—go figure.

Looping her wrist through the strap, Eleanor clasped her coat more tightly around her neck, tapping her toe in an impatient tattoo as she waited for the city bus to come to a standstill. Not that she had anything important waiting for her when she arrived home. She merely hated waste—wasted time, wasted energy,

wasted emotion.

Vainly she tried to shake off the impatience and frustration that invariably settled under her skin with bad weather. The smells of exhaust, damp earth and wet wool hung in the air around her, infiltrating her consciousness like mustard gas. The noise of raindrops splatting against the windows and drumming to the ground muted the sounds she'd become accustomed to absorbing on her ride home from work—the snore of Ed Mecham, who would sleep to the end of the line, the rustle of newspapers, the chatter of the Selma sisters who rode the number nine to mass each Wednesday and Friday. Calming sounds. Ritualistic sounds.

The thump of the doors roused her from her stupor, and she descended the steep steps, feeling carefully with her toe before stepping onto the curb. Once safe and sound, she hit the bicycle bell with her thumb, a signal to Burt Mescalero that he could drive on.

Behind her, the engine grumbled and whined, and a fine spray of water splashed the backs of her legs. Then she was alone.

Eleanor arched her neck to relieve it of the kink the muscles had developed after an hour huddled at the cramped food counter of The Flick Theatre, an establishment near old Larimer Square that was devoted to playing classic movies in their original, wide-screen format.

“Damn those gumdrops,” she said to herself, referring to a case of candies that had fallen down the back stairs, spilling

cellophane-wrapped packages all over the storeroom floor. Eleanor had spent a half hour on her hands and knees picking them up. If not for that small disaster, she would have been home on one of Burt's earlier runs. But...c'est la vie, as her mother would say. Everything happened for a reason.

Absolutely everything.

A sharp gust of cold air swirled around her ankles, and she huddled even tighter into the shelter of her coat. It was cold this evening. Too cold for the beginning of May, she decided, as she took three precise steps to the center of the sidewalk, turned right and began to count.

One, two, three, four...

She tapped her cane on the wet pavement ahead of her, seeking out the obstacles her eyes couldn't see. Not clearly, anyhow. Sometimes she experienced hazy patches of gray or muted blotches of light. But for the most part her world was one of darkness. An inescapable darkness that would be her constant companion at least until the baby was born. And then...

She didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to think about the corneal transplant surgery her ophthalmologist had proposed, not knowing whether such an operation would allow her to see as she once had or leave her fumbling in a world of light and shadows.

Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen...

Everyone she knew said Eleanor had adjusted beautifully—her doctor, her mother, her co-workers. But Eleanor wasn't so

certain. Oh, she could find her way around town, perform her duties at work and live on her own. But sometimes, on nights like these, when she was angry and tired and out of sorts, she couldn't help thinking that she was a poor sport in God's little game of life. Perhaps if she hadn't relied so heavily upon her sight as an artist, she might not have regarded the loss with such bitterness. She might have been able to "suffer with elegance" as her sister Blythe had once advised her to do.

As it happened, she couldn't seem to resign herself to the fact that her identity had been shattered the moment her head had collided with the window frame of her car. The change in fortunes bothered the hell out of her, burning at the pit of her stomach whenever she allowed herself to think about it.

She'd been a good artist, dammit.

She'd been asked to have a show at the National Gallery.

And a partial return of her sight would never allow her to retain the finesse she'd once mastered.

Twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight...

Eleanor Rappaport's boot heels rapped sharply against the pavement—and for a moment she thought she heard an accompanying set of footsteps behind her. Automatically she quickened her pace. It annoyed her how some people felt that her being blind was the same as being incompetent. She didn't want help crossing the street, she didn't want anyone leading her home like a stray puppy. She could do it herself.

But as she quickened her step, the sounds behind her increased

their speed, echoing her own pace. Thinking whoever was behind her wanted to pass, she stopped and turned.

The noises stopped, as well.

The anger that had been building in her all day raged even hotter. She hated being made to appear a fool, almost as much as she hated being made to appear helpless.

“Who’s there?” she called out.

No answer. Only the sputter of the rain gurgling down a nearby gutter.

Eleanor squinted, blinking against the moisture dripping from her hair, down her face, off her dark glasses, hoping to catch a shadow, a shape. But the light was too poor to allow her even the haziest of images.

Shivering, she began to walk again, crossing the quiet street, moving as quickly as she could. She didn’t have the patience for such pranks. It was time she arrived home, out of the rain.

But after only a few steps she realized she’d lost count.

Damn.

Damn, damn, damn.

Ringling the bell on her cane, she lifted her head calling out, “Minnie! Maude!”

As she waited for a response from her landladies, who were elderly, unmarried and avid game-show fanatics, a tightness closed around her throat and she paused, swallowing hard. For a moment the frustration closed in on her like a shroud. The same frustration that had dogged her since that night when she’d been

pulled from the mangled wreckage of her car. While waiting for an ambulance, she'd focused on a stranger's face. The red glow of flares had flickered over dark hair and even darker eyes. Then the colors had grown dim and died completely away, leaving her grasping at the hand of a stranger as she was plunged into nothingness.

Stop it! She didn't want to remember that night. Not tonight.

Ringing the bell more stridently than before, Eleanor shouted, "Minnie—"

"Here, dear," a sweet, old voice interrupted, providing Eleanor with the bearings she needed.

Minnie.

Since Eleanor's grandmother had lived in this neighborhood before she'd died, Minnie and Maude Vanderbilt had been her dearest friends. They'd even been godmothers to Eleanor's mother, and Eleanor had known them both as a child. She pictured Minnie as she'd been then. Short and plump with cotton-candy hair rinsed a pale shade of yellow. She was the perfect foil for her older sister, Maude, who was tall and reed thin and wore an array of different-colored wigs.

"My lands, you're soaked to the skin, child. Maude's not home right now, but I could fix you a cup of tea. Jeopardy! is about to start, and you can watch it with me as you dry out."

Eleanor made her way toward the voice, but it was only when she encountered the rough, peeling paint of a picket fence that the tension building inside her breast eased.

Had someone really been following her? Dogging her steps? The hairs at her nape prickled in warning, but there were no sounds to substantiate the suspicion. Nothing that the rain didn't completely obscure.

As soon as her toe touched the bottom step to the brownstone's stoop, she asked, "Minnie, is there anyone behind me on the sidewalk?" Her voice much weaker than she would have wished.

If Minnie thought the request was odd, she didn't say so. Eleanor caught the scent of geraniums as Minnie leaned forward. "No, dear. There's no one there. Let's get you inside."

When Minnie offered her elbow, Eleanor took it, stepping into the vestibule of the old building and shaking the rain from her coat.

Even so, she knew she hadn't imagined anything.

Someone had been out there.

Someone had followed her home.

"How about that tea?" Minnie asked.

Still shaken, Eleanor headed for the stairs. "Thanks, Minnie, but I think I'll head up to my own apartment. After the day I've had, I'm ready for a long soak in the tub."

"Very well. You call if you need anything."

"Thanks."

But even as she climbed the steps, Eleanor couldn't push away the feeling that she was being watched.

Chapter Two

Jack MacAllister remained in the shadow of a doorway directly across the street, mere yards from where he had first encountered Eleanor Rappaport.

Less than twenty-four hours had elapsed since Jack had decided to see Eleanor. To his surprise, she'd been easy enough to find. A search of the Internet had resulted in his learning she resided in Denver, and a look at the Yellow Pages had revealed an E. Rappaport. After silently debating with himself, Jack had made a quick call...

The moment he'd heard her voice, he'd felt as if someone had kicked him in the stomach. He'd become suddenly tongue-tied—and feeling like an adolescent fool, he'd hung up without saying a word.

Eleanor Rappaport.

His head was pounding, but this time the sensation had nothing to do with a concussion and everything to do with stunned disbelief. He had seen this woman only once before, at the scene of a horrible accident. He had been there to help drag her from her car, he had cradled her head in his lap as he'd waited for the emergency teams to arrive.

He'd been there to watch the light grow dim in her eyes.

Jack's knees became weak, and he sank onto the top step of the small, family owned grocery store. Bowing his head,

he took huge gulps of rain-soaked air in an effort to calm his erratic thoughts. Wave upon wave, the nightmares he'd been experiencing for months inundated his senses, but that was nothing compared to what he had just seen in the flesh. The living embodiment of his dreams.

Growling to himself, Jack stood, striding into the rain and into the night. Whatever internal need had dragged him to Denver had been satisfied, and now he was leaving. For good. He'd seen Eleanor Rappaport. She was still blind, but apparently coping.

And pregnant. Very, very pregnant. Why hadn't he known she was pregnant?

A strange, twisting sensation gripped his chest. The accident had occurred six months earlier, so she couldn't have been too far along when she'd lost her sight.

Jack wrenched his thoughts back into line. Eleanor Rappaport's pregnancy was none of his business.

"What's up?" One-Eye asked from the passenger seat of the too-small rental car.

"Nothing."

"Is that the girl?"

"Yeah." His brief reply discouraged any more questions. "I'm ready to head to L.A. now."

"You what?" One-Eye blurted. "But we just got here. We've checked into a hotel, laid out our dainties—"

"We're going home, One-Eye," Jack said sternly.

One-Eye shrugged and settled back in his seat. "Fine. If you

don't want to tell me what brought you all the way to Denver—”

Jack remained silent.

“You know that Rappaport woman is nothing but a stranger.” One-Eye grimaced. “Course, you weren't looking at her like a stranger.”

Jack shot the older man a scathing look, but his irritation bounced off the man's weathered hide.

One-Eye still looked perplexed at the reason for their impromptu visit to Denver, so Jack offered what he hoped would sound like a logical explanation. “I've been thinking about her lately. I wanted to make sure she was doing all right.”

“Uh-huh.” But it was clear that One-Eye thought Jack was leaving something out.

“Now that I've had a chance to see her, I'm ready to go home. Do you have any objections?”

One-Eye shook his head. “That's fine by me. But why can't we have a steak and a good night's sleep before we get back on another plane?”

Jack opened his mouth to insist that they leave Denver. Now. But seeing One-Eye's hopeful expression, he relented.

“Fine. I'll book us on a flight tomorrow morning.”

One-Eye grinned. “Now you're talking! Let's find us a place to eat.”

“COME ALONG, DEAR. We won't take no for an answer.”

Eleanor grimaced, realizing that what Maude said was true. Once Minnie and Maude got an idea in their heads, they would

move Heaven and Earth to get their own way.

In many ways Eleanor was grateful for her landladies' single-minded determinedness. Such resolve had led them to accompany Regina Rappaport to her daughter's hospital room after the accident. While Regina had stayed by Eleanor's bedside, reassuring Eleanor time and again that she hadn't miscarried, Minnie and Maude had searched for the best specialists in the country. These same doctors had treated Eleanor's injuries, allowing her to see some light and shadow and had given her hope for future transplant surgery. As Eleanor had begun to recover more fully, Minnie and Maude had been there to comfort her when her fiancé had abruptly called off their two-year engagement. They'd weathered her moods from rage to despair—to the euphoria she'd experienced when her ultrasound had revealed no evident trauma to the baby. Bit by bit, they'd bullied and cajoled her into rejoining the "real world." The sisters had even offered her their upstairs apartment in Denver so that Eleanor could continue to live on her own and fend for herself. And once the baby was born...well, they had already made plans to be her live-in nannies.

But there were times Eleanor wished Minnie and Maude could be a bit more malleable. Like tonight. After the day she'd had, Eleanor wasn't in the mood to go out to dinner in a crowded restaurant, eat unfamiliar food, and chit-chat with her mother's godmothers.

"Go on. Get dressed. There's a love," Minnie said with a push

at Eleanor's shoulders.

Rolling her eyes, Eleanor realized it would be much easier to surrender than fight.

"Just grit your teeth and bear it, little one," she murmured to the tiny life nestled beneath her heart. Then, with a soothing rub of her hand over her stomach to still the sudden flurry of agitated kicks, she plodded to the bedroom.

JACK WAS SURPRISED when One-Eye decided upon an intimate, elegant restaurant located on the ground floor of the Kensington Hotel. The two of them were led to a small room that held only four tables and had been decorated to resemble a Victorian dining hall.

A waiter in a starched white shirt and pleated black trousers, handed them a menu, then went to gather their drinks.

One-Eye clapped his hands together, surveying the list of food. "Hot damn! This is better than any lunch wagon, isn't it?"

Since both of them had spent most of the last three months eating from catering trucks on the set, Jack had to agree. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to sit down to a meal without having a thousand work details waiting for his attention.

"So what's your next project?" One-Eye asked.

Jack shrugged. "I've got an action film scheduled for the fall, but I'm thinking of taking some time off until then."

One-Eye nodded sagely. "That sounds like a winning plan. You look like hell."

Jack grimaced. “Thanks a lot.”

“No, I mean it. You look like a horse that’s been ridden hard and put away without a rubdown—and it’s not just the accident. You’ve been pushing yourself too much these past few years.”

The waiter arrived with their drinks and appetizers, preventing Jack from replying. As he gave his order, he glanced at an oval mirror hanging above a marble fireplace.

Did he really look that bad? Granted, he’d been working hard, lately, but after a couple of weeks, he’d be fine.

“Jack, I know you think I’m pestering you,” One-Eye continued as soon as the waiter had left. “But I’ve been worried about you, boy.”

Everyone was a boy to One-Eye.

“I’ve seen this sort of thing happen before in this business. A man gets himself a reputation for being good at his stunts, he takes every job he can, works long hours, forgets about his own needs.”

“Needs?” Jack echoed, his eyes drawn to a figure swimming into view in the old mirror.

Long, dark hair. Blue eyes.

His gut tensed in reaction, a chill sweeping through his body. Eleanor Rappaport? What was she doing here?

“A man’s got to have a life outside his job,” One-Eye was saying. “Why, I can’t remember the last time I even saw you with a woman. It’s not natural, I tell you. If you ask me, I think you should...”

One-Eye's advice lapped over Jack like a warm wave, barely registering in his consciousness. Instead, he found himself watching Eleanor Rappaport as she made her way to the table opposite his own.

Sit down, he found himself silently wishing. Sit down there, facing me.

As if she'd heard the words being spoken aloud, she hesitated, then made her way to the far side. A tall woman wearing a raven wig held her chair, then gestured for another elderly woman to do the same. Jack immediately recognized the smaller old woman as being an occupant of the brownstone with the shocking-pink door. Eleanor must live with the pair of women.

Jack watched Eleanor fold her cane, then place it in the bag she'd set on the floor. When she straightened, she looked his way, and he averted his eyes—then mocked himself for such an instinctive reaction. She couldn't see him. She couldn't know he was staring at her.

“Are you finished?”

He started when the waiter reached toward his half-eaten salad.

“No. I'm still working on it.”

“Of course.”

The waiter placed a bowl of thick seafood chowder on the table, then retreated.

“She's a pretty girl,” One-eye commented slyly.

Jack glanced at One-Eye, then away.

“Yes. She is.”

“Isn’t that the same woman you saw earlier?”

Jack forced himself to keep his attention on his plate and eat.

“Yes. That’s her.”

One-Eye lapsed into silence for a moment, then said, “So is this meeting an accident?”

Jack glared at him. “You picked the restaurant.”

The man chewed thoughtfully. “That’s right. I did.”

One-Eye’s suspicions appeared to have been allayed, but Jack wished his own could be so easily put to rest. The fact that Eleanor had come here, to a table mere feet away from his own, was enough to make a pragmatist believe in the powers of Fate.

“The accident was months ago,” One-eye remarked after a moment of silence. “What made you start worrying about her again?”

Jack shrugged. “I guess the rollover in Washington reminded me of her. I’ve been thinking about her ever since.”

Thinking?

Obsessing would be a better term. Ever since her image had begun to haunt him, he’d been unable to concentrate on anything else.

“She seems to be getting along well,” One-Eye observed.

“Yes. She does.”

Tearing his attention away from the woman, Jack forced himself to eat. He even managed to carry on a normal conversation with One-Eye until the two elderly women led

Eleanor out the French doors to the lobby beyond, then left her there. Alone. Jack watched as they went to the desk and began conversing with the manager, leaving Eleanor standing near the tufted armchairs.

One-Eye lapsed into silence—an unusual event for him, especially when his belly was full and the coffee was rich and black.

“Why don’t you go talk to her?”

Jack jumped as if One-Eye had touched him with a cattle prod. “What?”

“Go talk to her.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t think I should.”

“Why not?” One-Eye’s grin was lazy. “Hell’s bells, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so antsy.”

Jack scowled at the man, then realized One-Eye was right. He hadn’t tasted any of his food, even though he’d eaten his fill. All of his energies had been directed toward Eleanor Rappaport.

What would it hurt to talk to her?

Jack stood from the table and made his way through the French doors. With each step he damned himself for feeling a need to make contact with the woman. After all, she’d been the one to come to this restaurant. She’d been the one to inspire this confrontation.

What did he plan to say to her, anyway? Hi, this is Jack MacAllister? Remember me? I’m the one who held you that night you lost your sight? I know it was an accident, but you

probably hate me still because it was my truck that struck your car. Nevertheless, I'd like to...

What? What would he like to say or do for this woman?

Jack halted a few feet away from her, inwardly cursing. This whole situation was insane. There was no casual way to force an introduction. He couldn't approach her out of the blue.

Then, as if his doubts had been heard by some unseen force, he watched disbelievingly as the silk scarf she'd draped over one shoulder caught a gust of air from the front door and fluttered to the floor.

"Damn."

He heard her curse under her breath and grinned. My, my, my. Perhaps she wasn't as prim and proper as she appeared to be in her high-buttoned dress and lacy collar.

Picking up the scarf, Jack did his best to ignore the waft of perfume that twined around his senses.

"I believe this is yours," he said to Eleanor.

She didn't start, so he supposed she must have heard his approach.

"Thank you."

She held her hand out, and he laid the scarf there, resisting the urge to stroke it over her palm to see if her skin was as sensitive as it looked.

"My pleasure."

Her head cocked to one side. "I was with a pair of older women and—"

“They’re still at the manager’s desk. Would you like me to call them over?”

“No. That won’t be necessary. I merely thought they would be done with their negotiations by now.”

“Negotiations?”

“My landladies are belly dancing enthusiasts. They would like to schedule the banquet room for an upcoming workshop.”

Jack shot a glance at the two women who stood by the desk. “Belly dancing?”

Her lips twitched with open amusement. “It’s only one of many pastimes they have. They also indulge in social dancing, anthropology and yoga. They even belong to a gun club.”

He whistled softly, liking the way that Eleanor’s features had brightened with humor. “That sounds interesting.”

She shrugged, and the gesture caused the silky fabric of her dress to move against her shoulders. Idly, he wondered what Eleanor Rappaport would do if he touched her there. Just once. Just long enough to assure himself that she was real.

But then his eyes shifted, and he absorbed the folds of fabric draped over her rounded stomach.

She’s real, his inner voice assured him wryly. She’s real and she’s off-limits.

So why didn’t the reminder of her condition dissuade him from looking at her? He could feel a faint heat seeping into his arm where she stood closest to him. The hint of perfume that had clung to her scarf also clung to her hair. Her skin.

Jack opened his mouth to say something more, something to give him a reason to linger near her for a moment longer. But when he heard the elderly women making their goodbyes to the manager, he knew it was time to go. He'd decided he didn't want Eleanor's landladies to see him with their charge. Why such a thing would matter, he didn't know. But he needed this moment, this meeting, to be between him and Eleanor, no one else.

"Will you be all right here alone?" He paused, then couldn't resist adding, "Perhaps I should wait until your husband returns."

He knew full well that there had been no male accompanying the women, but he had to know for sure.

Eleanor's lips twitched in a faint smile. "There is no husband," she said patting her stomach gently. "And I'll be fine. Thank you. My companions seem to be coming back."

"Then I'll be on my way."

He touched her then. He couldn't help it. He had to lay his hand over her shoulder and squeeze ever so slightly.

A bolt of white-hot energy shot through his body. It took all the will he could muster to tear himself away and walk resolutely into the dining room.

Chapter Three

“Do you mind telling me why we’re in such a hurry to get out of Denver?” One-Eye asked as he dropped his duffel bag on the floor and planted his hands on his hips.

“We’re not in a rush,” Jack reassured him. “I just want to catch the first flight this morning, that’s all.”

One-Eye snorted. “There’s another one leaving in three hours. Why wake us both at the crack of dawn?”

Jack didn’t bother to answer the man. After a restless night, haunted by dreams of Eleanor Rappaport, he was in no mood to humor anyone. He wanted to be rid of Denver as soon as possible.

“If you were to ask me,” One-Eye continued without urging, “I’d say your recent concussion must have rattled some of your marbles. You’re as jumpy as a one-armed man in a boxing ring. You ought to relax, see the sights. We could take in a tour of the Mint or one of the local resorts. There’s baseball, or...”

Barely listening to One-Eye’s monologue, Jack packed his belongings into a canvas bag and called the airline to confirm their tickets. Then, after ushering One-Eye from the room, he allowed the older man to drive to the airport, all the while enduring his chatter about the sights they would miss.

Once at the airport Jack paid for the car with his credit card, casting glances at the bold digital clock that ticked off the minutes to his flight. He and One-Eye would have to hurry.

Spurred by his thoughts, Jack rushed to the waiting shuttle bus. “Come on, One-Eye, or we’ll miss our plane.”

“Coming!” One-Eye grumbled, clearly loath to hurry any more than he had already.

Once the bus had dropped them off at the terminal, Jack checked the overhead monitors, then loped in the direction of the underground train, which would take them to the proper boarding gate. With each jarring step, his head pounded more fiercely, and his chest grew tight with something akin to guilt.

But why should he feel guilty? He’d come to Denver, seen Eleanor Rappaport and reassured himself that she was dealing with her blindness. What more could anyone demand of him? He wasn’t indebted to her in any way. The accident all those months ago had been just that...an accident. Even Eleanor Rappaport’s mother had insisted as much, according to the news report Jack had seen the morning after the incident. No charges had ever been filed against any of the people involved, no lawsuits begun.

So he shouldn’t feel anything but relief in escaping Colorado.

As he emerged onto concourse B, Jack heard their flight being announced and breathed a sigh of relief. He and One-Eye had arrived in time to board, but were late enough that Jack wouldn’t have to sit in the terminal and ponder the strange events that had brought him to this place. Within hours he would be in Los Angeles, back in his apartment, back in his normal routine.

Jack dodged around the other travelers, taking the escalator steps two at a time, while One-Eye trotted after him like a

devoted puppy.

As soon as they arrived in Los Angeles, Jack would arrange some time off for himself. After a few weeks of rest and relaxation, he would be fine. He was sure of it. He wouldn't think about Denver. Or Eleanor Rappaport. He wouldn't wonder what could have happened if he'd stayed for one more day....

Stay. Just one more day, something inside him whispered.

No. He couldn't. He needed to get back home.

"Your ticket, sir?"

Too late he realized he'd been standing in front of the check-in counter, staring into space while a pretty airline employee waited to process his boarding pass.

"Your ticket?"

"Sure." He dragged the crumpled documents from his breast pocket, but as he handed them to the flight attendant, he was suddenly loath to let go. He became abruptly aware of the throbbing of his head and the aches of his weary body.

Funny, but when he'd been talking to Eleanor, he hadn't remembered his injuries. He'd been so involved with her he hadn't given himself another thought.

"Sir?"

Blinking, he stared at the too-pretty face of the flight attendant. But even as he stared at the woman, he found himself struck with a sudden thought. How was Eleanor going to take care of a child? What steps had she taken for the baby's arrival? It was obvious that Eleanor had adjusted to a life alone, but what

about the challenges of caring for an infant as well?

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I—”

The throbbing in his head increased. A tight band of worry tightened around his chest.

One-Eye touched his arm in concern. “Jack? What is it? You’ve gone as white as a sheet.”

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. “Nothing, I—”

But he couldn’t finish the sentence. If he left, he would always wonder about Eleanor and her baby. Hell, he didn’t even know for sure if she was alone. He knew nothing about her other than she lived with two elderly women in an aging brownstone.

So who was the baby’s father? Had Eleanor been abandoned? Had she been abandoned because of her blindness?

Nausea gripped his stomach, and his anxiety increased.

Holding the ticket more firmly, Jack tried to extend it again, but as he did the sickness intensified. The clerk nearly tore it from his fingers, but he barely noticed.

Dammit all to hell, what was happening to him? He had no business insinuating himself in Eleanor Rappaport’s life.

The attendant peered at him in concern. “Your friend is right, sir. You do look pale. Are you sure you don’t want me to...”

The words flowed around him like thick honey, but Jack couldn’t grasp their meaning. Not when he was being flooded with an overwhelming dread. In an instant he knew that if he stepped on that plane, he would be making one of the biggest

mistakes in his life.

“Dammit,” he whispered to himself.

Go back, a voice whispered inside him. You have to go back to her.

“No.”

Too late, he realized he’d spoken the word aloud, because both the flight attendant and One-Eye were studying him strangely.

Cursing under his breath, Jack turned and strode in the opposite direction.

“Sir? Your ticket!”

He didn’t stop. He didn’t pause. Vaguely he heard One-Eye running after him, but all Jack could think about was that he would have to confront Eleanor Rappaport again. Soon.

JACK HAD ORIGINALLY SUPPOSED that once his decision was made, he would grow comfortable with the thought of seeing Eleanor Rappaport again. But he wasn’t.

That fact alone was completely unsettling. He was a man who was accustomed to putting his life in danger. He made a living from such a practice. So why should a mere slip of a woman unsettle him so completely?

Shying away from an answer he sensed he wasn’t quite ready to examine, he vowed to approach this problem in a logical manner. He would plot each angle, investigate every possibility, just as if Eleanor Rappaport were a stunt to be choreographed.

That planning brought him to a boutique located among the exclusive shops lining Larimer Square.

Jack sipped from the foam cup of coffee he held and shoved his free hand deeper into his jacket. The sky was overcast and threatened more rain. The air hung thick with the scents of spring—damp earth, new buds and grass. A restlessness was in the air, a thrumming anticipation. As if there were something waiting for him, just out of reach.

And then he saw her. Eleanor Rappaport.

She was quite lovely, he had to give her that. She had long, thick hair the color of rich chocolate. Her bone structure was delicate, her carriage ethereal, her body slim and lithe. Even in the last stages of pregnancy, she walked with the grace of a dancer, her hand resting in the crook of her mother's arm. The two of them were laughing as they came to a stop in front of Regina's shop. Victoria's Closet suited them both, with its old-world facade and vintage-style displays.

Jack slouched a little deeper into the bench where he sat. Pulling the brim of his baseball hat lower over his brow, he remained quiet and still, the coffee forgotten, as the women stopped, kissed each other on either cheek, then said their goodbyes.

It wasn't until they'd parted and Eleanor had made her way nearly a block down the street that Jack stood. From the opposite side of the street, he followed her for a hundred yards to where she stopped in front of an ornate movie theater. He saw her take a ring of keys from her pocket and open the door, then enter and lock up again.

Jack stood there a few minutes more, waiting for the lights to turn on—then realized they wouldn't be coming on. Why should they? Eleanor Rappaport didn't need them.

Drinking the last of the coffee, he tossed the cup into the garbage and retraced his steps. It was time he had some information, personal information, about Eleanor Rappaport.

“What's up, boss?”

Too late he noted that One-Eye had somehow followed him from the hotel and from there to Larimer Square.

“I thought you were going to sleep in?”

“You woke me up when you slammed the door.”

“Uh-huh.”

One-Eye had the grace to look sheepish, but he quickly turned the tables on Jack. “You've seen her again, haven't you? That blind woman you encountered in the restaurant.”

Jack didn't answer. He began moving quickly down the street, already thinking about his next move.

“Well?” One-Eye demanded, scrambling to catch up.

“Yes,” Jack confirmed shortly. “I saw her.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“I'm going to rent a car.”

“What for?”

“I need to visit her landladies.”

One-Eye halted in his tracks. “Her landladies! What in heaven's name for?”

ELEANOR STOOD IN THE SHADOWS just inside The

Flick. The sensation had come again. That strange feeling of being watched. It had begun only a few minutes ago and hadn't eased until she'd closed herself in the theater.

Who was watching her? And why?

Growling to herself in suppressed rage, she stomped into the office, reaching for the tiny cassette recorder that was left there each day. Although she'd begun classes in Braille, Eleanor hadn't yet mastered the skill of reading the tiny bumps with the tips of her fingers, so she had been forced to find other means to circumvent the lists and books and written words she had taken for granted as a sighted person.

"Eleanor, it's Babs." The familiar, recorded voice spilled into the silence, filling the room with its warmth.

Barbara Worthington, the owner of The Flick, was a quick-witted, energetic woman who spent her days with her small son, Philip, and her husband, Tom, then worked during the evening hours.

Five years earlier Barbara had reopened the restored movie house under the guise of providing healthy snacks and even "healthier" movies—the films selected from a variety of classics and modern releases that Babs felt were "art." Because of her dedication to avant-garde films, original promotional ideas, guest lecturers and community college involvement, Babs's original idea had developed a cult following. Her devoted customers guaranteed nearly full houses for its evening shows and healthy numbers of customers for the matinees, as well.

“We’ve got a shipment of canola oil coming just after eleven. Tell them I won’t take that generic stuff they keep trying to foist on us. As far as I’m concerned, it tastes like axle grease. I want the good stuff, just as we advertise. The best they’ve got. After all, the Bell’s Angels will be coming from the Bell Retirement Villa for the two-o’clock showing of *Magnificent Obsession*. I can’t have any of them dropping in the aisle from a coronary because they ate the popcorn. Other than that, take care of the usual jobs—stocking counters, filling towel dispensers, whatever else needs to be done. Brian will be in to help you about ten-thirty. He’ll take care of the cleaning and check the projectors. ’Bye.”

Replacing the recorder where she’d found it, Eleanor grimaced and reached for the wraparound apron hanging on the back door. Yet another fascinating day in the world of the cinema was about to begin. She didn’t have time to think about who might be following her.

Later.

She’d think about it once she’d gone home.

ELEANOR WAS JUST CLOSING the front door to the brownstone when she heard the flap-flap of Minnie’s slippers. Minnie invariably exchanged her shoes for fur-edged mules whenever she entered the house, while Maude remained in her support oxfords until she retired for bed. Thankfully, such idiosyncrasies allowed Eleanor to tell the women apart.

“Hello, Minnie.”

There was a heartfelt sigh from the direction of Minnie's door. "I'm so glad you're home. I wasn't sure you would make it in time."

Eleanor frowned. "In time?"

Minnie took her hand, the elderly woman's fingers slightly cold and soft as a baby's. "These came for you."

Eleanor ran her palm over the familiar shapes of three thick books.

"The art department from the university sent them. They said that you'd agreed to evaluate them for their art history classes."

"You should have refused their proposal, Eleanor." Maude's voice chimed in from the depths of their apartment. "You're looking much too tired lately."

"I'm fine, Maude," Eleanor insisted, raising her voice to be heard. But even as she uttered the words, she resisted the urge to sigh. She had agreed to do this for the university, but it had been so long since the request had been made, she'd forgotten all about the arrangement. If the truth were known, she'd been sure that they would never call. Since her father was a dean at the same university, she'd suspected that the offer was made through good-natured arm twisting and not from any real need.

"A reader will be coming at seven," Minnie continued, "and it's almost that now."

Maude added, "You'll have to hurry, dear, if you want time to run a comb through your hair."

"A reader?" Eleanor echoed, wondering how all of these

arrangements had been made without her input.

“Yes. Evidently there’s some rush. Something about purchase orders and grants and funding. I really didn’t listen too much to that part. But I did write down that a volunteer reader would be here at seven.” She patted Eleanor’s hand. “I met your reader earlier today. We had a cup of tea together and chatted for a few minutes.”

Eleanor scowled in irritation. She’d been assigned several volunteer readers from the university over the past few months. After dealing with the young students, she’d come to the conclusion that she preferred to choose her own assistants. Some of the kids sent her way could barely read themselves, others had annoying voices or distracting habits. A reader was much like a car. It needed to be test-driven before becoming a permanent part of one’s life.

But Minnie wasn’t to blame for the situation, so there was no sense in Eleanor venting her irritation.

“Thank you for your help, Minnie,” she managed to say. “If you’ll just stack the books on my arm.”

The collection of art history texts weighed nearly ten pounds, but Eleanor was able to make the climb to the third-floor landing without too much difficulty.

Because the four-story brownstone had been altered from its original one-family dwelling into a two-apartment complex, Minnie and Maude had the first two floors for their own use, and Eleanor had the top two.

Twisting the knob, Eleanor entered the living room and dumped the books and her purse on the couch by the door. Although she was not a vain woman, she wished she had more time before the reader was expected. One of the volunteers she'd used a few months ago had commented on the "dustiness" of Eleanor's furnishings. Until that encounter, Eleanor hadn't paid much attention to her living quarters. She kept her belongings neat out of necessity, but dusting wasn't her strong suit.

Her fingers ran lightly over the chair rail along the wall as she hurried into her bedroom, brushed her hair, twisted it into a French knot and secured it with an ornate clip her mother had given her years ago. Then she threw off the sweater and maternity jeans she'd worn to work, exchanging them for a lighter cotton dress. Minnie and Maude liked their apartment to be warm—almost tropical. Even with her own thermostat off, Eleanor's rooms tended to get quite hot.

She was making her way to the bathroom to attempt a bit of blush and eye shadow when the doorbell rang.

"Blast it all," she muttered under her breath. Why hadn't the university at least called to see if this evening would be convenient for such an activity? The last thing Eleanor wanted that night was hours of listening to some gum-popping, barely out-of-high-school teenager stumbling her way through an art history tome.

The doorbell rang again, then was followed by a sharp rap on the panels.

“Coming,” she called out impatiently. If first impressions were worth anything, Eleanor was ready to send the woman packing. After all, this was Eleanor’s home. She shouldn’t be summoned to the door as if she were some sort of inconvenience to this girl’s valuable time.

Piqued, Eleanor threw the door open. “Listen, I realize that you’re new at this, but if the two of us are going to work together, there are a few ground rules you’ll need to follow.”

“Fine.”

The voice wasn’t that of a woman. It was very dark, very low. And very male.

Chapter Four

Eleanor's irritation fizzled out, and she felt her cheeks grow hot when she realized that her visitor was a man. One with a voice that was rich as molasses.

Her head tilted and she stood for several seconds, absorbing what she could from senses that had grown keener since her accident but still could not reassure her as much as a quick visual study had once done.

“You were sent by the university?” she asked.

“I'm the reader.”

No. This would never do.

Eleanor folded her arms over her stomach, holding a protective hand to the spot where even the baby kicked in alarm—telling body language, she knew, but she couldn't help it. She'd been expecting a woman. The university had always sent women in the past—Eleanor herself had made such a request. She didn't want to open herself up to the complications inherent in inviting a man into her life. In her experience, men were...well, different. They had odd expectation levels. They tended to be brusque, unemotional, impatient and didactic. She didn't want that kind of baggage in a reader.

“There must be some mistake, Mr....”

“You can call me Jack.”

She didn't want to call him anything. She didn't want him in

her house, reading in that low, lazy, drawling sort of voice—a voice that sounded strangely familiar....

No. She wanted someone of her own sex, someone who would be decidedly safer.

Safer?

“Jack, then,” she said grudgingly. She really would have preferred knowing his last name. There was something more professional about firing a person by using last names. “There must have been some mistake. I can assure you I—”

“No mistake.”

He shifted, and Eleanor started when the action brought with it a whiff of a clean, woodsy cologne. The delicate hairs on her arms stood on end. She felt the warmth of his body and knew that he must be standing close. Very close.

“Mr....”

“Call me Jack,” he said again.

Sighing, she stepped out of the way, knowing that she would have to consult with the university about changing readers. Until then she needed to make the best of the situation.

“Come on in, Jack.”

She felt him brush past her, and her skin tingled from the brief contact.

“The books are on the couch. Have a seat.”

The old settee creaked comfortably as he settled onto the cushions.

Eleanor made her way to the overstuffed chair opposite.

She could thank her mother for decorating the apartment. While Eleanor had been in rehabilitation, Regina had seen to it that Eleanor's things were moved out of Roger's condo. Originally, Regina had insisted that Eleanor move in with her, since Regina and Eleanor's father were divorced. But Eleanor had been adamant about maintaining at least some part of her independence, so Regina had contacted her godmothers, obtained this apartment—the same one she'd rented during her college years—and had arranged Eleanor's belongings with a minimum of clutter.

“You were going to tell me your ground rules.”

The velvety tones brought Eleanor back to the present with a jolt.

“If we continue to work together—”

“If?”

Eleanor sighed. Already, she sensed Jack was an “interrupter.” She hated people who wouldn't let her finish her sentences.

“If we continue to work together, I will expect you to be prompt and adaptable to changes in my schedule. I will also expect you to have a rudimentary pronunciation of the names and subjects involved.”

What she didn't tell him was that she wasn't really considering him for the position.

“Fine.”

“If I am satisfied with the relationship, there is a possibility that I may ask you to help with some other reading work. Should

that prove to be the case, I will pay you an hourly wage in accordance with the current rate.”

“That’s not necessary. I volunteered for the position.”

Eleanor tamped down the frustration she felt at being the recipient of such charity. She couldn’t help thinking that there were other people far more deserving or needy of volunteer services. She had her family or her landladies to help her. Even Brian and Babs were willing to read when things were slow.

But not three sets of text books.

She sighed. No. She doubted there was anyone on the face of the earth who would willingly read three art history books.

“Mr.—”

“Jack. Jack MacAllister. But I wish you’d call me Jack.”

Why was she having such a hard time using his first name? Why did it seem overly familiar?

“I don’t suppose that you have an artistic background?” she asked wearily.

“Yes, ma’am, I do.”

The unexpected answer caused her head to tilt.

“Really? In what area?”

“Film.”

It wasn’t exactly what she needed for the current project, but Eleanor supposed that even a student of cinema would be required to take courses in basic composition.

“What do you do, Jack?” she asked.

“When?”

Her lips twitched at the purposely obtuse answer. She caught the hint of teasing in his tone.

“When you’re not reading for strange blind women.”

“I’m on vacation.”

“From what.”

“Working.”

“Oh, really?” she said drolly. “And what might that be?”

“I jump off things.”

The statement was so startling that Eleanor could find no immediate response.

“Beg pardon?”

“I jump off things. I’m a stuntman.”

“Locally?”

“I...freelance a lot.”

She frowned. “You’re serious? Can a person make a living doing something like that?”

“You’d be surprised.”

Deciding he was teasing her again, she dropped the line of questioning.

“Why have you volunteered to be my reader, Jack?”

“I needed something to do.”

“So you got out of bed one morning and said to yourself, ‘Hey, let’s find a blind lady with a lot of big books.’”

“Something like that.”

“There are other ways to relieve boredom.”

“That’s probably true, but I chose this as my diversion of

choice.”

“Other than your studies, you mean?”

He didn't answer and she took his silence as an affirmative remark, knowing that if he had nodded, she would have missed the gesture. She wished that she could see the tilt of his body. She missed being able to interpret subtle, body-language cues she had grown so accustomed to using to her advantage when meeting someone new.

“Why should I keep you as my reader, Jack?”

Eleanor was not normally so blunt, but there was something about this man, about the way he sounded so self-assured, so almost...arrogant, that made her think the shocking lack of manners would help her to measure him more fully.

She felt, rather than heard, the way he leaned forward. She could almost picture what he must look like, tall, lean, propping his elbows on his knees. He was probably broodingly dark or elegantly blond. Something to match that voice. That incredible voice.

“You should keep me, because you need my help.”

“I would think that particular point was obvious, Jack. But why do I need you?”

The moment the question had been uttered, she found herself wishing she hadn't been so bold. A curious silence had begun to flood the room in ever-widening ripples. One that was somehow invigorating and frightening at the same time. She had never encountered such a sensation before, an aura of energy that

began to infuse her body so completely that she found her mouth growing dry and her breathing shallow.

“You need what I can give you.”

She waited, praying he would elaborate and set her fears at ease before her mind began to insinuate all sorts of subtle shadings to that remark.

“You need my insight. My passion.”

“Passion?” she could barely force the words from her throat.

“My passion for the subject.”

“Oh, yes.” She cleared her throat, to relieve it of the husky quality it had adopted. “But I thought you said your specialty was film.”

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