



*Her One and Only*

a novel

**BECKY WADE**



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Becky Wade, *Her One and Only*  
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*For editor extraordinaire, Charlene Patterson*

*Thank you so much for the effort and belief you dedicated to my novels. Your intelligence and experience were matched only by your kindness and enthusiasm. Your input strengthened each story in important ways and I'm wholeheartedly grateful to you.*

# Prologue

Dru lifted her handgun, leveling it on Gray's stalker as she rushed forward through the crowd. The realization that she'd been outsmarted washed over her with sickening certainty. Gray was unprotected. The stalker had pistols in both hands, both barrels aimed at Gray. Had she been next to Gray, she'd have shoved him down, been able to dodge in front of him to keep him safe. But she was much too far away for that. Despair arced through her mind and heart. She was too far. He was unprotected.

"Lower your weapons," she demanded, shouldering past bystanders.

The stalker's face turned sharply in her direction, giving her a direct line of sight into facial features that were drawn and blank. Viciously cold.

The attacker kept one of the guns trained on Gray. The other pistol moved, with chilling deliberation, until its barrel aimed squarely at Dru.

"No!" Gray yelled.

The stalker's attention returned to Gray, fingers whitening on the triggers.

*Her One and Only*

Dru fired.

Her bullet met its mark.

But so did the stalker's. *So did the stalker's.*

Ammunition tore into tender flesh, destroying the muscle and bone and organs in its path. A screaming denial the color of red obliterated Dru's thoughts.

Furious, she fired again.



## Chapter One

### *Three months earlier*

Dru Angelica Porter was a former Marine, a black belt in jiu-jitsu, a national pistol-shooting champion, and an experienced executive protection agent for Dallas's most prestigious security company. She was also about to meet her new client. A new client who would, just like all her past clients, be too busy trying to process the fact that she was female to give a hoot about her qualifications.

When people heard the term *bodyguard*, they very predictably imagined big, muscle-bound guys in suits and sunglasses, with wires coiling up from their shirts into earpieces.

Dru wasn't big or muscle-bound. Today's "suit" consisted of a pewter-colored leather jacket, closely fitted, with several creatively placed zippers and a collar that turned up behind her neck. High-quality white shirt. Slim black trousers. Heels. Her sunglasses were stashed in her purse. No wire coiled into an earpiece.

She was an executive protection agent à la the new millennium.

She made her way down the hallway that led to the administrative offices for the NFL's Dallas Mustangs. The Mustangs' complex, which also housed the team's practice field, gym, and a physical therapy wing, had been decorated, without a great deal of

creativity, in the Mustangs' colors. A carpet of light blue trimmed in hunter green and white absorbed her footfalls. The gleaming ivory walls sported horizontal green and blue stripes, as well as framed action shots of the team.

*Go Mustangs!* the decor seemed to shout. *Rah, rah, rah! Go, fight, win, team!*

She paused to peer at one of the photos. Confetti laced a brightly lit sky behind the team as they hoisted the Lombardi Trophy. The season before last, the Mustangs had won the Super Bowl. Dru frowned slightly at the image, which showed the players with sweaty hair and big grins and hastily donned hats and t-shirts pronouncing them the champs. No doubt she'd find all this team spirit more charming if she actually *liked* the Mustangs.

Like any good Texan, she was a born and bred Cowboys fan. She'd always viewed the Mustangs, a relatively new franchise team and the Cowboys' crosstown rivals, the way one might view an upstart in-law who arrived at a family reunion and ate all the sheet cake.

Her gaze traced across the photo before coming to a stop on the face of her new client. Gray Fowler, famed Mustangs' tight end, battle-hardened warrior, object of a million infatuations, was not the client she'd have chosen for her first executive protection assignment after the disaster in Mexico.

Celebrities who'd reached Gray Fowler's level of fame could be egotistical, bossy, and unmanageable. Athletes of his caliber were sometimes full of testosterone and stupid machismo. Add the two together and—no. They did not equal Dru's dream client. Any type of businessperson, even the brash, hard-charging type who never set aside their smartphone, would have been preferable. A politician? Fine. The teenage daughter of a billionaire who needed to be taken to field hockey practice after school? Sure.

Since Mexico, for the past year and a half, she'd been riding a desk job at Sutton Security's downtown Dallas office. It had taken her longer than she'd expected to rehabilitate her body. To put her life back together. To earn back the complete trust of her boss,

Anthony Sutton. The backward step on her career ladder had dealt a blow to both her professional aspirations and her pride. She'd been itching for, praying for, waiting for this chance to get back out in the field and prove her capability.

So she *would be* fulfilling her protective responsibilities toward Gray Fowler expertly, doggedly, and exactly by the book. She drew in a slow, determined breath and straightened her posture. Gray Fowler had decimated the baddest defensive players the NFL could serve up. But he'd yet to meet the likes of her. Woe to him if he got in her way.

She knocked on the door of the team's GM at exactly two o'clock. An administrative assistant ushered her into a spacious office filled with at least twelve people and five conversations.

One group of executives thronged the centrally positioned desk. Another had gathered on the room's left. On the right, she caught sight of Big Mack, her co-worker at Sutton. An African-American man in his early forties, Mack looked every inch the bodyguard stereotype. Unless one knew him, one would never guess that his two tween daughters had gotten their gentle giant of a father hooked on the Disney Channel and the musical stylings of *5 Seconds of Summer*.

Big Mack smiled at her and motioned her forward with a large paw of a hand. "Afternoon, Dru. How you been?"

"Afternoon, Mack. I've been well. You?"

"Can't complain." He stepped to the side, giving Dru her first glimpse of Gray Fowler. Their agency's newest client was sitting on a small sofa, leaning back, one hand tucked casually behind his head. He'd focused his attention up and to the side and was in conversation with a fellow player who stood at the sofa's end.

Fowler had the profile of a gladiator, no prettiness to it whatsoever. His corded neck gave way to the hard, clean line of his jaw. His skin was lightly tanned, his lean cheeks marked with a five-o'clock shadow. He kept his dark brown hair short on the sides, slightly longer on top.

Dru had done her best to study him, both through the informa-



tion provided by her agency and through her own private research. Very few details existed about his childhood. She'd been able to learn only that he had a younger brother and sister and that he'd overcome a mysteriously rocky start in small-town Mullins, Texas. He'd then parlayed his athletic ability into a star turn at Texas A&M before being drafted in the early rounds by the Mustangs.

He was not a man who'd stumbled or bough or lucked his way into success. He'd earned his success one tackle, catch, block, and injury at a time. His toughness, speed, and steely concentration had lifted him to his current status as one of the Mustangs' most popular players. He had a reputation with journalists as a straight talker and a reputation with entertainment reporters as a ladies' man. He'd been selected to the Pro Bowl eight times in his ten-year career, was one of the architects of the Mustangs' Super Bowl victory, and in general, broke football records as easily as other people ate cereal.

The player Gray had been talking to moved off, and Gray's face turned toward Dru. He looked squarely at her, holding himself still, his eyes glinting an unusual pale green.

*He's trouble.* Of all the words in the English language, those were the two that slid into her mind.

This particular client might prove even *more* difficult than the garden-variety celebrity athlete she'd been steeling herself for. Grayson Robert Fowler looked to her like a load of dark, head-strong, dangerous trouble.

He rose smoothly to his feet without breaking eye contact. She'd known before entering the room that he stood at six feet, four inches and weighed two fifty. Even so, the physical reality of his size took her back.

It wasn't common, in everyday life, to come across a person as big as he was. Beneath the Mustangs hooded sweatshirt and track pants he wore, his body was huge, his muscles rosy and hard.

Not for the first time, she wished she'd grown to a height of six feet, eight inches, like some of the WNBA stars. Instead, her three-inch heels boosted her up to five-eleven, not a quarter inch more.

“Gray,” Mack said, “this is Dru Porter. She’s with Sutton Security. She’ll be your protective agent for the 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. shift five days a week, starting today.”

Gray’s face remained unmoving, as if he was waiting for someone to shout, *Just kidding, dude!* and fist bump him. Exactly as expected, he was busy trying to process the fact that she was female.

“This is Gray Fowler,” Mack said to Dru, “our new client.”

“Nice to meet you.” She extended her hand, and Gray shook it, his grip strong and slightly calloused.

“Likewise.” He had blunt cheekbones. Faint creases marked the skin at the edges of his eyes and across his forehead.

Mack edged toward the GM’s desk. “I’ll just go and let Mr. Morris know that Dru’s arrived.”

Gray stuck his hands into either side of the rectangular front pocket on his sweatshirt and took his time studying her. “You’re my new bodyguard,” he stated slowly.

“Executive protective agent.”

“You’re my new executive protective agent.”

“I’m one of them, yes.”

“You.”

“Yes. Me.” She brought her long, straight, dark hair forward over one shoulder.

“I was expecting all of the agents from Sutton Security to look like Mack.”

“*All* of our clients expect the agents to look like Mack.”

“You don’t look like Mack.”

“No.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-six.”

He scratched the side of his head, returned his hand to the pocket. “Why would Sutton Security send a woman younger than I am and half my size to protect me?”

On the one hand, his skepticism irritated her like stinging nettles. She’d faced this same sort of skepticism all her life from her three older brothers. On the other hand, his directness meant

that she could address him with equal directness. She wouldn't have to waste her time on political correctness and fake politeness. "Sutton sent me because I'm qualified. I'm a former Marine, and before I became an agent I had to undergo rigorous training at Sutton Security—"

"Which included?"

"Study of armed combat, threat assessment, first aid, and lots more. On top of all that, I've been licensed by the state of Texas to do this job."

He still looked doubtful.

"Executive protection mostly requires me to use my brain," she stated, "rarely my body or my gun."

"What was your name again?"

"Dru Porter. What was yours again?"

His expression filled with a mix of humor and disbelief. "Gray Fowler."

"Ah." She gave him a small smile. "That's right."

"How do you spell your name?"

"D. R. U."

"Huh." He sized her up. "Just between you and me, Dru Porter, I'm not worried about my safety." Gray's team had hired Sutton's services, not Gray himself. "I didn't ask for protection in the first place, so if Sutton wants me to hang out with someone who looks like a model, I'm fine with it."

"I don't look like a model."

"You look exactly like a model."

"Also, I won't be *hanging out* with you. I'll be working."

"Here's my issue with you." He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "I can't have everyone knowing that a hot-looking, twenty-something girl—"

"—woman—"

"Is my bodyguard—"

"Executive protection agent."

"I'll never hear the end of it in the locker room."

Chauvinism was still alive and well. She crossed her arms and

narrowed her eyes. “Your safety is my top priority, not your locker-room reputation.”

“My reputation’s important to me, though. And if it’s important to me, it’ll be important to him.” He angled a shoulder toward Brian Morris, the general manager.

She wanted to tell Gray to shove his concerns about his reputation. In fact, she wished she could bark out all sorts of orders that her clients would be compelled to follow. As it was, her clients were entitled to a pesky thing called free will. She could advise them, but she couldn’t force.

Compromise stunk.

“No one has to know that I’m assigned to you other than the people you decide to tell,” Dru said, her voice level. “But if you want us to go that route, then you’ll lose the deterring effect that agents can have. If your assailant sees that you’re accompanied by agents, he or she will be less likely to attack.”

“I don’t care about the deterring effect.”

Figured. “In that case, I can provide low-profile protection that won’t give people any reason to think I’m an agent.”

“You could pose as my girlfriend.”

Dru centered him in the crosshairs of her iciest glare. Strong men—Marines, protection agents, and some of the best pistol shooters on the planet—had wilted under that glare.

Gray didn’t. In fact, since their conversation had begun, his demeanor toward her had been frank and unflinching.

“Don’t you have a girlfriend currently?” Dru asked.

“I’m in between.”

“Wouldn’t any girlfriend of yours have a job? I can’t imagine that she’d be free to trail after you five afternoons a week.”

Two of the team’s coaches nodded to Gray in parting as they moved toward the door. Gray lifted his chin in response. “Maybe my new girlfriend is a preschool teacher who only works in the mornings.”

She uncrossed her arms, somewhat incredulous. “Does anything about me read preschool teacher?”

“Nothing. But there’s always an exception that proves the rule. You can pretend to be my unorthodox, preschool-teaching girlfriend.”

Dru had never—not even in elementary school when she’d done a unit called *What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?*—hoped to become anyone’s preschool-teaching girlfriend. “I think it makes far more sense for me to pose as your administrative assistant.”

“I don’t need an administrative assistant. I have a housekeeper named Ashley who handles my house and my schedule for me. All the players know her.”

“I could be a journalist working on a story about you.”

He raised an eyebrow with an air of smugness. “For days and days on end? No one would believe that, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart.”

Brian Morris stood and politely requested that everyone not a part of his scheduled 2:15 meeting clear out of the office.

The room emptied. Mack introduced Dru to Morris, then Dru settled into one of the leather chairs facing the desk. Mack opted to stand near her elbow. Gray took the remaining chair, crossing an ankle over a knee. His big athletic shoes looked brand new, as if he’d put them on for the first time an hour ago. Maybe that came with the territory for a professional football player. Women. Glory. New Nikes.

Mr. Morris’s rimless glasses looked as expensive as the designer business shirt he wore. He appeared to be in his fifties, fit, with tidy auburn hair that had begun to gray and thin.

Except for more of the blue, green, and ivory carpeting, Morris’s office didn’t continue the *Rah! Rah!* chant. The furniture was serviceable. The lighting, fluorescent. The desk supported neat stacks of paper and three family photos. On this second Friday of November, the bright and cloudless sky beyond the windows behind Morris’s desk camouflaged a cold day that wouldn’t reach fifty degrees.

“Weston Kinney will be coming by later today to introduce himself,” Dru told Morris. “He’ll be working the 10:00 p.m. to

6:00 a.m. shift on the days that Mack and I will be working. Other agents will rotate in for us on our days off.”

“Good.” Morris centered a notepad in front of him, picked up a pen, then leaned back in his chair to take Dru and Mack’s measure. “I wanted this chance to meet you so that we can get communication going between us. I’d like a lot of back and forth on this.”

“Yes, sir,” Mack agreed.

“Have you both read through the threatening letters Gray’s received?” Morris asked.

“We have,” Dru answered. Black 18-point Arial font printed by an inkjet printer onto plain white paper. The letters were always mailed in ordinary business envelopes that could be purchased at any Walmart. So far the fingerprints the police had salvaged from the envelopes all traced back to employees of the U.S. Postal Service. Both the mailing address and the return address were always printed onto labels in black 11-point Arial font.

“Gray, remind me how long it’s been,” Morris said, “since you started receiving the letters.”

“More than a year.” Gray appeared slightly bored, like he had a pressing game of golf to get to now that practice had wrapped up for the day.

Irritation with him simmered beneath Dru’s cool facade. *Sweet-heart? Really?* “I heard that you threw out the first several letters.”

“Yeah. I’ve been getting mail from people who don’t like me since college. If letters are really nasty, I hand them off to team security. If they’re just ordinarily nasty, I throw them out.”

“When you first started receiving letters from this individual . . .” Mack prompted.

“They were just ordinarily nasty,” Gray answered. “I tossed them.”

“What types of things did those early letters say?” Mack asked.

“I hate you, you’re worthless.” The expression Gray turned on Dru seemed to say, *What’d you think? That this job was all roses? You’re not that naïve.* “They were short, just like all the letters have been. A few sentences.”

Morris leaned forward, settling his forearms on his desktop. “Here at the Mustangs, we differentiate between critical comments and actual specific threats toward our players.”

As did the law, Dru knew.

“Recently, the letters from this individual have turned into threats,” Morris continued. “We’ve seen the situation escalate in other ways, too. For example, Gray used to receive the letters only at home. Lately the person who’s sending the letters mails some here. Some to Gray’s lake house, some to his cabin in Colorado. Even to his mother’s house in Mullins.”

“Do the letters arrive at the locations when you’re there?” Dru asked Gray.

“Yes.”

“Which is why we’ve come to the conclusion that this individual is stalking Gray,” Morris stated. “How often did the letters come at the beginning, Gray?”

“Over the first eight or nine months, the letters came every month or two. Then it was every few weeks. Since our first preseason game, I’ve been receiving a letter at least once a week, sometimes more.”

“Anthony Sutton told us that the letters are mailed from a variety of locations,” Dru said. Anthony, the owner of their agency, had a background in special ops and wasn’t the kind of person you’d want to attempt to rob in a dark alley.

“Yes,” Morris answered. “Since the time Gray told us about the letters, we’ve been keeping record of the postmark on each envelope, as well as scanning the letters themselves before turning them over to the police. The letters have come from places as far as a four-hour drive from here in every direction. The return address is always that of the stadium where we play.”

“Who have you been working with in the Dallas PD?” Mack asked.

“Detective Carlyle,” Morris answered. “He’s good, but he doesn’t have any leads yet.” He tapped his pen twice against his notepad. “Which is why we brought in Sutton Security. Until this thing is resolved, we’ll all feel better knowing that Gray has protection.”

Except Gray himself, according to what he'd already told her. Gray met her eyes. A trace of cynicism lit the green depths.

"Anthony Sutton mentioned that you've noticed an older-model maroon truck following you," Dru said to him.

"I haven't seen it following me, exactly. I've seen it parked on a street near where I live. Then outside the stadium, and then at a restaurant I was leaving the night before last."

"Did you get its license plate number?" Dru asked.

Gray nodded. "When I saw the truck outside the restaurant, I wrote down the license plate number and gave it to the police. Apparently, the truck's registered to a little old lady who lives in Bonham, Texas."

"Make of the truck?" Dru asked.

"Ford." He smiled, looking genuinely entertained for the first time. "Do you think a little old lady is my stalker?"

"It could be," Dru answered.

"I think it's more likely that it's a coincidence that I happened to notice a couple of maroon trucks around."

In real life, coincidences happened. But in Dru's line of work, coincidences were taken seriously and with a heaping dose of investigation. She addressed Morris. "We'll look into the maroon truck, and we'll work out threat assessments on anyone known to have animosity toward Gray."

"The entire fan base of the Cowboys?" Gray asked dryly under his breath.

She forged ahead. "We'll surveil the environment when we're with Gray, and we'll also run a fair amount of counter-surveillance. In other words, we'll hide ourselves and observe Gray and the places he visits from a distance in an effort to catch the person who's following him while they're in the process of doing just that."

"Good," Morris said. Two more pen taps. "Thank you."

"If Detective Carlyle comes up with any information we need to know," Mack said, "please contact us with it."

"We'll contact you," Morris assured them. "This is a group



effort. Our security team here at the Mustangs can provide you with badges, passes, clearance, whatever you need. The safety of our players is our highest priority.”

Excluding when those players were out on the field. Then they could thrash each other bloody. It’s what made football so entertaining.

“I’m hoping that we’ll find Gray’s stalker in short order.” Morris gave Gray a subdued smile. “Gray’s important to this team.”

An understatement. In the multi-billion-dollar business of the NFL, Gray was as close to priceless to the Mustangs organization as a player could be. They wanted to protect their asset in the same way the Metropolitan Museum of Art would want to protect their Rembrandt. The Mustangs weren’t about to let their Rembrandt get damaged.

Dru had always liked puzzle-solving. The more challenging and dangerous the puzzle, the better. Gray Fowler, with his thickheaded chauvinism, would surely prove to be a pain. But finding his stalker was going to be a pleasure.

She moved to rise from her seat—

“Dru and I were just talking,” Gray said to his GM.

She resettled herself.

“I told her that I’d like for the bodyguards to stay low-key. I might tell one or two of my close friends about them, but other than that, I don’t want anyone knowing about them or the letters.” He held steady eye contact with Morris. Clearly, he’d been around the negotiating table a few times.

“All right.” Morris looked questioningly at Mack and Dru. “What do you think?”

“Sure, sure,” said Mack, who was naturally easygoing and friendly. Dru wondered how often anyone in Gray’s life piped up and said no to him. Rarely, she’d guess. He probably hadn’t received a tenth of the reprimanding he deserved.

Gray moved his weight forward in his seat. “This is going to be the story, in case anybody asks. Mack is my new chauffeur. Is that good with you, Mack?”

“Yeah, man. That’ll give me a reason to buy a chauffeur’s hat. Very cool.”

“Dru is my new girlfriend,” Gray continued. “If anyone wonders why a woman her age is free several afternoons a week, she and I decided we’d tell them it’s because she teaches preschool.”

*She and I decided?* The nerve! Dru straightened as if she had a metal rod for a spine. All the scathing things she wanted to say piled up on her tongue.

“How old’s Weston, the guy that’ll be working the night shift?” Gray asked Mack.

“Around thirty,” Mack answered.

“When Weston’s with me at dinner or clubs or whatever, I’ll just introduce him as a buddy of mine.”

A stretch of silence descended. Gray made eye contact with each of them, self-assured and forceful.

Dru longed to tell him how much she loathed his plan. However, she hadn’t known her new client for even an hour yet. It might be wise to attempt a full hour in Gray’s company before opposing him in public. If she gave either Gray or Morris a reason to call Anthony Sutton and ask to have her replaced, she’d instantly be replaced.

This case was the chance she’d been waiting for, the chance she needed. *Remember, Dru? Compromise. Plus a few Advil.*

“Sounds good, Gray,” Mack said admiringly. Mack was a Mustangs fan and couldn’t be trusted to view Gray objectively. “We’ll do our best to accommodate your ideas.”



He didn’t particularly like his new bodyguard.

She was about as warm as January.

Gray had squeezed a lot of living and too many girlfriends to count into his thirty-two years, so he knew what he liked. He liked sweet women who laughed at all his jokes. If he had to pick between a rich girl with a lot of education and a friendly girl with no education, he’d go with the friendly girl every time. He liked

curves and easy smiles and cheerful, agreeable personalities. If he said, *Want to go to a nightclub?* his ideal woman would say, *Sure!*

*Want to wear my jersey and cheer for me at the next home game?*  
*I'd love to!*

*Would you mind serving my buddies and me drinks while we watch Monday Night Football?*

*Happy to!*

Crazy guess, but he didn't think his new bodyguard would answer any of those questions the way his ideal woman would. He slanted a look across the restaurant, to where Dru sat alone at a table for two.

An hour ago, they'd arrived at this modern Japanese restaurant near his Dallas neighborhood so he could attend a dinner meeting with a few of the board members of Grace Street. Grace Street was a nonprofit that offered outreach programs for abused women and children. He supported a handful of charities, but Grace Street had become his favorite.

Dru, who didn't shy away from offering her opinion, had told him that she saw no need for him to insert his new fake girlfriend into his dinner plans. She'd informed him that she'd go her separate way as soon as they entered the restaurant. Which was how things had gone down.

The board members were talking amongst themselves, trying to figure out some of the details that had come up regarding his participation in their Winter Family Fun Day event, scheduled for early February.

He looked down at his small plate. It contained small pieces of sushi, a small lump of ginger, and a small lump of wasabi. Why was everything in Japanese restaurants so small? Did this place have any idea how much he ate?

Board members still talking. He returned his gaze to Dru.

She ate politely, one hand in her lap, her attention taking in their surroundings.

After the meeting with Morris, he'd driven to Sutton Security's Dallas office. She'd followed him on her motorcycle. She drove a

*motorcycle*. He had a few bikes himself, but his were big. They were the kind of machines you could drive and have a beer afterward and not be made fun of by anyone in the bar. Her motorcycle was an older-model Kawasaki Z750, all black, made for agility and speed.

At Sutton Security, Dru and Anthony Sutton had questioned him for hours about the idiotic letters, what his blood type was, who his friends and employees were, and about all the people he'd ever come across in his life who hated him. He'd also had to give them addresses, phone numbers, the locations of the places he usually visited in a week, a list of places he'd be going this week in particular, and on and on.

When Anthony Sutton had excused himself, he'd been alone with Dru, who'd taken the opportunity to lecture him. She'd outlined the dangers he was facing, rattled off statistics about all the ways he could be killed, and tried to convince him to follow her rules exactly in order to improve his likelihood of seeing his thirty-third birthday. He waited for her to finish.

"Has that little speech scared your other clients into obeying you?"

"Only the smart ones."

"It's not going to come close to working on me."

She scowled in that threatening way she had, and he almost laughed.

"I've got a lot on my plate right now," he continued. "The only thing I want to care about or have time to care about is winning football games." So far this season, his team had a seven and two record. "All my energy is focused on one goal. Another Super Bowl title."

"It'll be hard to win the Super Bowl if you're a corpse."

"I told Morris he could hire you guys because it's in my best interest to get along with the Mustangs admin. But I don't want to be inconvenienced by you or your security measures. So go ahead and do what you need to do, but I'm going to continue living my life. I'm not afraid of my stalker."

"You might take him or her more seriously once—"

“I’m a corpse? I’d rather be a corpse than bend over backward to do whatever crazy thing it is you want me to do.”

She reminded him of those lady detectives on cop shows set in New York. She was tough. No nonsense. Intense. He’d only seen her smile once all day, in Morris’s office when she’d pretended to have forgotten his name.

So far, there were only two things he liked about her.

One, she was beautiful. When he’d first seen her, he’d had a hard time adjusting to it, her beauty. Her eyes were the color of the light blue water that ran up onto the beaches of the Caribbean island he visited every spring. She was both taller and slimmer than the average woman. She had long brown hair, so dark it was almost black. Her perfect creamy skin didn’t show a single freckle or wrinkle. She looked like an icy European princess.

Two, he found it sort of . . . entertaining to rile her. She was easy to stir up. And every time he stirred her up, she got all offended and defensive. Her eyes would snap white sparks, her mouth would purse, and she’d look like she was dying to cuss him out, and would have, if she’d been allowed to. He might enjoy hearing her let him have it with both barrels sometime. He’d cornered her into pretending to be his girlfriend mostly because he could tell the idea made her mad, which, in turn, amused him.

With a face like hers—the cheekbones, the narrow nose, the sculpted chin—she could have been a model or the kind of actress who starred as the babe in action movies. She’d have made a fortune doing either. Instead she was here in this Japanese restaurant tonight, supposedly guarding him.

A fresh sense of disbelief washed over him. Part of him was still waiting for the crew of a show like *Punk’d* to jump out of the bushes with their cameras, laughing, and admit that they’d played an elaborate joke on him.

The small woman protecting the big football player? It insulted him some, the fact that anyone would think him so defenseless that he’d need *her* as a bodyguard. What could she possibly do for him that he couldn’t do for himself?

As a young kid, he'd been too adult for his age, responsible, a rule-follower. Then the dirt bag had come into his life.

He remembered sitting in the back of a closet with Colton, who'd been a kindergartner at the time.

*"You idiot, Gray! What a sorry excuse for a human being. You're an embarrassment."*

Gray had put his hand gently over Colton's mouth and held a finger up to his own lips to tell Colton to be silent. His little brother's eyes got big and round. Gray drew his knees up and tried to make both of them as small as he could in the closet's corner. Clothes brushed against his head. His heart beat like fast-running feet.

*"Where are you, boy? Worthless kid!"* The door to the closet ripped back, and light fell over them. The dirt bag's body filled the opening, his face screwed tight by anger. The man had gripped Gray by the upper arm and yanked him out.

After . . .

After that, Gray had ditched all the sucking up he'd done when he'd been younger. The polite rule-following hadn't served him well.

By ninth grade, he'd finally started to grow into his size. At first, he'd been gangly. His hands and feet and nose had gotten big before the rest of him could catch up. He'd begun wailing on a punching bag in his basement. Midway through that year, his freshman year, a kid had picked a fight with him. He'd finally had a chance to use his size and his new skills. He'd beaten up the kid so badly that he'd knocked him unconscious.

That fight had given Gray a taste of something he'd never had before.

Power.

After that, he'd searched out more fights. He'd started drinking and smoking, started stealing money from his mom's purse and driving her car. He'd gotten in and out of trouble with the police and school administrators. His grades had tanked because he'd avoided school as much as he'd attended.

Month after month, he grew. In height, in weight, in strength.

By rights, he should have ended up in prison. He probably

would have if his algebra teacher, who'd also been the school's assistant football coach, hadn't seen potential in him. When his teacher had first challenged Gray to try out for the football team before the start of his sophomore year, Gray had flipped the guy the bird. He'd had no interest in making an idiot of himself on a football field.

Gray had always told himself he hated organized sports, mainly because he'd never had the kind of mom who could be counted on to sign him up or pay for uniforms or take him to games or practices.

His algebra teacher had kept after him until Gray had finally agreed to show up for the first day of tryouts. Nothing more.

On that day, he'd been introduced to the great love of his life.

A game.

A game in which aggression was an asset. A game that had brought him fame and glory and money and thousands upon thousands of fans who idolized him because of how he played it. He was a Pro Bowl tight end in the NFL. He was a warhorse. He could protect himself without the help of a woman.

At last, Dru glanced in his direction, caught him staring, and gave him a subtle shake of her head. She didn't want him staring because, if his stalker was watching, she didn't want his interest in her to link them.

He gave her a "who cares?" expression and kept on staring.