

G U A R D I A N S *of* J U S T I C E # 2

DEADLY PURSUIT

A N O V E L

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To my husband, Tom—
who proves to me every day that a man
doesn't have to jump into raging rivers to be a hero.

Heavy breathing.

That was all she could hear.

No voice.

No background noise.

Just a palpable presence on the other end of the line.

Again.

Despite the warmth of the early May breeze wafting through her kitchen window, an icy shiver snaked down Alison Taylor's spine.

She glanced at the number displayed on caller ID. Compared it to the one thumbtacked to the small corkboard beside her phone. The one she'd jotted down after the second call.

It didn't match. But it looked vaguely familiar.

She grabbed a pen and wrote down the new number.

"Who is this?" She tried to sound poised. Unruffled. In control. But the tremor in her words betrayed her.

A sudden click as the line went dead was the only response.

I do not need this!

As she slammed the portable phone back into its holder, a startled yelp at her feet summed up Bert's reaction to her frustrated—and futile—gesture.

Bending down to pick up the fourteen-pound mutt she'd rescued from the animal shelter last summer, she winced as a twinge of pain radiated down her leg. Lately she'd begun to

forget about the steel rod inside. And that was a positive sign. It meant her recovery was progressing. But moments like this reminded her it wasn't yet complete.

And maybe never would be.

As Bert wriggled and stretched his neck to lick her face, his unrestrained affection helped chase away her sudden dejection—and uncoil the knot of tension in the pit of her stomach.

“Missed me while I was at work, did you, big guy? How does a walk sound on this beautiful St. Louis afternoon?”

The word *walk* set off another round of ecstatic slurping.

Chuckling, she set him on the floor again, moving more carefully this time. “Okay, okay, I get the message. Let me grab your leash and we’ll—”

The phone rang again, cutting her off midsentence.

Her heart stuttered, then tripped into double time as she edged toward the counter to check caller ID. She should have done that before answering the last call too. But Bert's enthusiastic welcome-home greeting had distracted her.

One glance at the display, however, set her mind at ease. Her two brothers had a tendency to be annoyingly overprotective, but she could handle them better than she was handling the anonymous calls. Especially Cole.

Bert nudged her leg when she picked up the phone, and she gave him a pat. “In a minute, big guy. Be patient.” As if. A rueful grin tugged at her mouth. Bert had many virtues, but patience wasn't one of them.

“Hi, Cole.” She grabbed the leash draped over a coat hook by the back door. “What's up?”

“Not much. Just checking in. How's my favorite sister?”

“I'd take that as a compliment, except I'm your only sister.”

“Are you evading my question?” Concern sharpened his tone.

She let out an exasperated sigh. “No. I was making a joke. The accident was a year ago, Cole. I'm fine, as I keep telling you and Jake. Although I have to say, our big brother hovers less since he and Liz got engaged three weeks ago. Maybe I need to find you a good woman too.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m serious. You’re thirty-five. You ought to have a wife and family by now.”

“You’re thirty-four, as of a couple of weeks ago.”

She clicked the leash on Bert’s collar, fighting back a wave of melancholy. If all had gone as she’d expected, she might have been married by now—as they both knew. Instead, her dreams of a husband and family had been shattered that fateful night a year ago.

“Alison . . . I’m sorry.” Contrition and self-reproach etched Cole’s words. “Sometimes I speak before I think.”

“No kidding.” She took a deep breath and lightened her tone. “However, my experience with David is ancient history. Besides, I have Bert now. Not a bad trade-off, if you ask me.”

Hearing his name, the dog gave her a hopeful look and began vigorously wagging his stubby tail, his whole body quivering in anticipation.

“Who wants to go for a walk, by the way.” Alison leaned down to pat him again, favoring her bad leg. “So if there’s no specific reason for your call other than to harass your little sister . . .” She let the words trail off, preparing to hang up.

“Actually, I do have another reason.”

At the trace of nervousness in his voice, Alison’s antenna went up. Her brothers rarely displayed even a hint of uneasiness. As a deputy U.S. marshal, Jake was a take-charge kind of guy—on and off the job. Cole wasn’t far behind. She’d been the victim of his brother-to-sister interrogations on numerous occasions, and she pitied the suspects who faced his official, on-the-job grilling. Police detectives didn’t come any sharper—or more relentless—than Cole Taylor.

When the silence lengthened, she prompted him. “You mentioned another reason?”

“Right. Here’s the thing. Remember me telling you at your birthday brunch that we were getting a new detective?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he started this week. Nice guy. My age. A former

Navy SEAL. He's spent the past four years with the NYPD—two on the SWAT team, two as a detective. His name's Mitch Morgan."

Silence fell again, and Alison frowned. Bert was tugging on the leg of her slacks now, his initial excitement over the prospect of a walk giving way to the necessity of a walk.

"Look, Cole, spit it out. Bert's sending me an urgent message here."

"Could you let him out in the backyard?"

"Is this going to take that long?"

"It might."

Huffing out a breath, Alison unclipped the leash and reached for the doorknob. "Fine. But I have one disappointed dog here. He was all geared up for a walk." Bert shot out the instant she opened the door and took off at a gallop for the nearest tree.

"Okay." She swiveled back to the kitchen. "You have my full attention. Continue."

"First, promise you won't say no right away."

Uh-oh.

Alison knew where this was headed, and she had no intention of going down that road again. "You're not trying to fix me up with this guy, are you?"

"Not for a lifetime. Just an evening."

"Yeah? Are you willing to take a lie detector test on that?"

"Hear me out, okay? Can you do that much at least?"

Picking up on his frustration, she bit back the retort that sprang to her lips. Cole's efforts to shore up her social life might be annoying, but they were well-intentioned.

"Sure. I can do that. As long as you know that when I decide to date again, the man will be of *my* choosing. Not one of the guys you and Jake have been trying to set me up with for the past six months."

"They were nice guys."

"I can handle my own love life."

"This isn't about your love life. It's about helping a guy out for one night."

Drat. People in need were her Achilles' heel—and both her brothers knew that. Positioning this as a favor to someone else was an excellent strategy.

Score one for Cole.

“Okay.” She might as well give up the fight. “What’s the deal?”

“He needs a date for his cousin’s wedding reception on Saturday night.”

“You don’t need a date for a family event.”

“You do if you’re a very eligible male and you don’t want every married female relative shoving single women at you.”

Good point.

Her resolve wavered.

“Will he expect me to dance?”

“I can tell him you don’t dance if you want me to, but I bet you could. I hardly notice the limp anymore. Come on, Alison. Help the guy out. He’s only been back in town two weeks, and he’s spent most of his free time doing some long-overdue repairs on his dad’s house. And here’s the other thing—his father will be riding with you to and from the reception. So it’s not a real date. But having you there will keep predators away from Mitch.”

“Maybe he wouldn’t mind a few predators.”

“Yes, he would. He told me almost the same thing you did. That when he’s ready to jump into the St. Louis social scene, he’ll choose his own dates. That’s why he’s not looking forward to having single women steered his way by well-meaning relatives at the reception. So what do you say? Can I tell him you’re willing to step in for the night and be a defensive shield?”

Defensive shield?

Not the most flattering role she’d ever played.

On the other hand, she had no plans for Saturday night. Why pass up a free meal, the chance to do a good deed, and an opportunity to dress up? Especially in such a safe setting. A guy couldn’t get too amorous with his father in tow, even if he was so inclined. And this one didn’t sound like he was, anyway.

“Okay. If he wants a date for the evening, I’ll go.”

“Great. I’ll check with him tomorrow and let you know what he says. You won’t regret this.”

“I hope not, brother dear. Because if I do, your name is mud.”



Why did I let Cole talk me into this?

As he sat in his car outside Alison Taylor’s small suburban bungalow, Mitch ran his finger around the collar of his dress shirt and wished he could ditch the tie. Or better yet, ditch this whole evening.

If he had it to do over, he’d never have gotten into that conversation with Cole on Tuesday. The one about meddling female relatives who can’t stand to see a guy stay single. And he sure wouldn’t have agreed to take his new colleague’s sister to this shindig when Cole had brought it up again on Wednesday, even though his colleague had picked up the tab for their burgers after work. He’d rather fend off a dozen women on the make than try to entertain one who was still too distraught to reenter the social scene a year after breaking up with her boyfriend. She was going to be a barrel of laughs.

But once Cole had mentioned an accident his sister had been in and said it would lift her spirits to get out, he’d been a goner.

His colleague’s largesse—plus the soft heart beneath his own tough-guy veneer—had done him in.

Resigned to a boring evening, he slid out of the car and considered the suit coat hanging on the hook above the door in the backseat. Should he bother putting it on?

Nah. It wasn’t like he was trying to impress a real date.

As he strolled up the concrete walk and climbed the steps to the porch, a muted, high-pitched yapping heralded his arrival. Some froufrou dog, no doubt. He’d lay odds the pooch was a nipper too.

Bracing himself, he pressed the doorbell.

Thirty seconds later, at the sound of a latch being pulled back, he pasted on a smile and gritted his teeth.

Look at it this way, Morgan. In three hours, max, it will be over. You can find an excuse to . . .

The door opened, and Mitch's mouth almost dropped open. Wow.

The wallet-sized family shot Cole had shown him, taken at his mother's birthday party last fall, hadn't come close to doing justice to Alison Taylor's classic oval face or her model-like cheekbones. To eyes as blue as a summer sky. To lips that were full and soft—and slightly parted, as if she, too, was surprised.

Her smile wavered, then steadied as she held out her hand. "Mitch, I presume."

He reached out and enfolded her slender fingers in his. At some peripheral level, he realized she was about five inches shorter than his six-foot height. But he was more intrigued by the way the late-afternoon sun was gilding the highlights in her shiny, dark blonde hair. Worn parted in the middle and tucked behind her ears, it fell just shy of her shoulders before turning under to frame her perfect face.

Double wow.

Alison Taylor was drop-dead gorgeous.

Clearing his throat, he restrained the urge to loosen his tie. Too bad he hadn't donned his jacket after all. "Guilty."

A tug on the cuff of his slacks caught his attention. Welcoming the excuse to regroup, he looked down.

"Bert!" Alison scolded the golden fluff ball at his feet, bending to scoop him into her arms. "Sorry about that." The skirt of her black cocktail dress was made of some kind of floaty fabric that billowed around her as she dropped down, emphasizing a waist that was impossibly small.

It took him a second to find his voice. "No problem."

She wobbled as she started to rise, and he reached out to steady her. "Careful."

"Thanks."

Once upright, she cuddled the dog close, a slight flush suffusing her cheeks. "I meant to put him in his cage before you got here. Come in and make yourself comfortable." She stepped back and gestured to the living room. "This will just take a minute. Will your dad be okay in the car?"

"My dad?" He tried to shift gears, but Alison's blue eyes got in the way.

"Yes. Cole said he'd be joining us tonight."

"Oh. Right. That was the original plan. But his sister and her husband are in town for the wedding, so he decided to ride with them."

Her eyes narrowed. "When did the plans change?"

"Thursday afternoon. My dad called me at work."

"Did Cole know that?"

"I think I mentioned it to him yesterday. Why?"

"It's not important."

Pressing her lips together, she turned on her heel and headed toward the kitchen.

But as Mitch took a seat on one of the side chairs in her living room, he sensed Cole's lapse was, indeed, important.

And he had a feeling it didn't bode well for his colleague.



You are dead meat, dear brother.

Alison latched the spacious cage in the basement, unmoved for once by Bert's pleading whine to be released.

Cole had known as of yesterday that the man's father wouldn't be part of the date, and he hadn't bothered to give her an update.

He was going to pay for this. Big-time.

Resting one hand on the cage for leverage, she straightened up. He was going to pay for something else too.

He'd failed to disclose that the bureau's newest detective was hot.

Very hot.

Okay, so maybe a guy wouldn't think in those terms. But all

he'd offered when she'd asked him on Thursday what Mitch looked like was that the man had brown hair and was tall. Pretty sketchy for a guy who dealt with detailed descriptions every day on the job.

He could have told her about Mitch's velvet brown eyes. Or his broad shoulders. Or his firm chin with the tiny Cary Grant cleft. Not to mention his potent presence, which radiated strength and integrity and leashed power.

No way did she believe Cole's reticence was an oversight.

On the other hand, why should she care, when the handsome man waiting upstairs was hers for the evening? She slipped her fingers into the cage and gave Bert's ear a distracted scratch. This could turn out to be a lot more interesting than she'd expected. Not that she'd ever tell Cole about her change of heart. Overprotective brothers might be bad.

But I-told-you-so-ing brothers were worse.



Seated at a small table tucked into one corner of the noisy VFW hall, where a rowdy duck dance was in progress, Mitch took a sip of soda. It was the first time he and Alison had been left alone. His relatives had all paraded by to say hello—and from their interested looks, it was clear they assumed he was on a real date rather than a mission of mercy.

Truth be told, he was beginning to wish it was a real date.

If it was, though, he wouldn't have brought Alison here. He'd have taken her to some classy place for a sit-down dinner instead of the roast-beef-and-mostaccioli buffet that was the standard fare at weddings in his family. A quiet place where they could have had a real conversation instead of trying to shout over a DJ who seemed to have only one volume setting on his equipment: deafening.

Not that Alison appeared to mind the down-home festivities or the noise. She'd chatted with everyone who'd stopped by, the epitome of graciousness. She'd impressed his father, who'd given him an approving wink when she wasn't looking.

And if her tapping foot was any indication, she was enjoying the silliness on the dance floor.

But he didn't want their evening to end with a duck dance.

Taking a final swing of soda, he leaned toward her. "You ready to head out?"

She looked at him in surprise. And unless he was way off base, there was a touch of regret in her eyes.

That was encouraging.

"Whenever you'd like to leave is fine, but we've only been here an hour and a half. Will your family be disappointed if you don't stay longer?"

"I've talked to everyone I need to, and trust me. In this crowd, my absence won't even be missed. Give me a minute to say good night to my dad and wish the bride and groom well, okay?"

"Sure."

He said his good-byes as quickly as he could, and as he wove back to their table she gathered up her purse and shawl and stood.

Taking her arm, he led the way out of the noisy, crowded hall. Just as they reached the deserted foyer, the duck dance ended and the DJ switched to the Nat King Cole/Natalie Cole rendition of "Unforgettable."

His step faltered.

"Did you forget something?"

At Alison's question, Mitch looked down at her. If she wasn't Cole's sister, if he hadn't been railroaded into this date, he wouldn't be hesitating over his next move. But he usually avoided being anything more than friendly to setup dates—and sisters of colleagues.

He'd already decided to break that rule when he'd opted for an early departure, though, and he wasn't going to rethink his decision.

"No. But it just occurred to me that I never invited you to dance."

A flicker of . . . distress? . . . darkened her irises to cobalt for a fleeting instant. "I don't dance much anymore. Cole was

supposed to mention that.” Her eyes did that squinty thing again. Like she wasn’t happy with her brother.

He ignored the reference to his fellow detective. It was always safer to stay out of family battles.

“Because of the car accident?”

Her grip on her small clutch purse tightened, wrinkling the black fabric. “Cole told you about that?”

“No details, if that’s what you mean.”

She hesitated for a moment before responding. “The accident did a number on my leg. It’s not a hundred percent yet.”

He’d wondered why she’d had trouble rising earlier in the evening when she’d dropped down to pick up her dog. Now he understood.

“Your walking doesn’t seem to be impaired, and a foxtrot doesn’t require much more than that.”

She stared at him. “You know how to foxtrot?”

“My mom insisted. She said knowing how to dance would impress girls.” He grinned. “Are you impressed?”

“Very.”

He held out his hand. “Why don’t we give it a try?”

Catching her lower lip between her teeth, she considered him. “I haven’t danced in quite a while.”

He gave her his most persuasive smile. “This isn’t *Dancing with the Stars*, Alison. There aren’t any judges watching us. Besides, I’m rusty too. My last couple of jobs haven’t offered me much opportunity to enjoy the finer things in life.”

The smile worked. She set her purse and shawl on a nearby folding chair, then stepped into his arms.

And into his heart.

At least that’s what it felt like.

Jolted, Mitch did his best to focus on shuffling his feet to the beat of the music. But it was hard to concentrate with Alison’s soft curves nestled against him. With her faint floral scent filling his nostrils. With her silky hair soft against his jaw and her breath a warm whisper against his throat.

“You don’t seem the least rusty to me.”

Her slightly unsteady comment refocused his attention.

“And your accident didn’t impair your dancing ability.” He eased her closer. She didn’t protest.

After that, there didn’t seem to be any need for words. They just moved in perfect unison to the music, as if they’d danced together many times before. As if they belonged together.

It was like no dance Mitch had ever experienced.

And he didn’t want it to end.

Eventually, though, the song would wind down. But perhaps the evening didn’t have to.

“I noticed they were setting out the wedding cake as I was saying good-bye to the bride and groom.” He kept the comment casual as he dipped his head to bring his lips closer to her ear—and her silky hair. “I can grab a piece for you if you like, but I know a better place for dessert, if you’re game.”

He detected a very faint hesitation in her step, as if she’d been taken off guard by his impromptu invitation.

“Can I tell you something?” With her cheek resting against his jacket, her uncertain question came out muffled.

“Sure.”

“I didn’t want to come tonight.”

A smile tugged at his lips. “Can I tell you something back? I didn’t either.”

“Cole told me you wanted a date to deflect advances from interested females. That I’d be a defensive shield.”

That was news to him. It seemed his new colleague had played on both their sympathies.

“And he told me your social life’s been lacking since you broke up with the guy you were dating.”

She stiffened in his arms but kept moving to the music. “Did he tell you why we broke up?”

“No.”

She relaxed a little. “I plan to have a long talk with my interfering brother.”

The song came to an end, and Mitch slowed his steps, then reluctantly released her from his arms. The bright overhead

lights in the foyer didn't provide one shred of romantic ambience, but as he stared down into Alison's eyes, he could have sworn he heard a violin somewhere. How nuts was that?

"I wouldn't be too hasty." His comment came out husky, and he cleared his throat. "This evening might turn out okay after all. Even if we were both manipulated into it."

"I'm not certain that's a good thing." She wrinkled her nose. "Watching Cole gloat won't be pretty."

He plucked her filmy lace shawl off the chair, chuckling as he draped it over her shoulders. "We don't have to give him a lot of details." After retrieving her purse, he took her arm and guided her toward the exit.

"Trust me, I don't plan to."

"So can I interest you in a detour for some dessert?" He pushed the door open, and they strolled toward his car. "I haven't been to Ted Drewes in years, and I won't feel like I'm really home until I have a strawberry concrete."

At the mention of the landmark South Side frozen custard stand, she gave him a suspicious look. "Did Cole tell you I like Ted Drewes?"

"No. This was my own idea. So you're a Ted Drewes fan?"

Her features relaxed. "Isn't everyone? Okay. I'm sold."

Once he settled her in his car, Mitch slipped his jacket off his shoulders, grinning as he circled around to the driver's side.

Now this was what he called a date.

A real one.

And if all went well, perhaps it would be the first of many.

2

Alison scooped the last bite of custard out of her cardboard cup, closed her eyes, and licked the plastic spoon as she leaned against the side of Mitch's midnight blue Accord. "Perfect!"

"I couldn't agree more."

Detecting a smile in his voice, she looked over at him. He was leaning against the car too, his long legs crossed at the ankles . . . and his gaze was fixed on her.

Under his blatant—and appreciative—perusal, heat rose on her cheeks. "Are you flirting with me, Mitch Morgan?"

"Guilty as charged. And not the least repentant." His smile broadened to a grin.

"We hardly know each other."

"There's a way to fix that."

She tapped the spoon against her empty cup and watched a stretch limo pull up in front of the simple custard stand. Streetlights had turned the ten o'clock darkness into daylight, but the crowds milling about paid scant attention to the wedding party emerging from behind the tinted privacy windows. It wasn't an unusual occurrence.

But being here with a handsome man—who made no secret of his interest—was out of the ordinary. Ted Drewes had been too plebian for David, and he'd never been in any hurry to advance their relationship.

Mitch, on the other hand, struck her as a man who went

after what he wanted with single-minded determination—and didn't waste any time doing it.

That sent a little thrill zipping through her. But it also scared her.

She turned back to him, deciding to repay honesty with honesty. "I'm not a fast mover, Mitch."

"I can be patient. If it's worth my while." He held her gaze, his own never wavering.

She blinked. "You don't mince words, do you?"

"Your old boyfriend did?"

"Let's just say he was a bit more . . . discreet . . . in his intentions."

"His mistake. What does he do for a living?"

"He's an attorney. For the Legal Aid Society."

"That figures. It's hard to get a straightforward or decisive opinion from a lawyer. Let me pitch that for you." He tugged her cup from her fingers and set off across the parking lot.

Watching the fabric of his dress shirt grow taut across his broad shoulders as he tossed the empty containers into the trash bin, Alison felt a faint flutter of excitement in the pit of her stomach. She hadn't experienced anything like this since the early days of David's courtship. Even then, there had never been such tangible chemistry.

But chemistry could be dangerous. Especially with a man who might view relationships in a far more casual light than she did. So she didn't intend to get carried away. Better safe than sorry, as the old adage cautioned. She needed to take things slow and easy.

As he rejoined her, he touched his tie. "Do you mind if I loosen this? The transition to jacket and tie has been tough. I peel off the formal attire as soon as I get home from the station and avoid it entirely on weekends."

Alison firmly banished that image from her mind. "No problem."

He tugged on the knot of silk at his throat and let out a relieved breath. "Better." Leaning back beside her against the

car, he shoved his hands in his pockets and shot her a rakish grin, producing a dimple in his cheek that matched the one in his chin. "So tell me about Alison."

She lifted her shoulders. "There's not much to tell. I grew up here. Got a degree in social work at one of the local universities. Landed a job in the Department of Social Services Children's Division, where I've been for the past twelve years. Compared to my brothers, I lead a quiet, boring life."

"Doing important work. Hard work. The unsung hero kind of stuff." He studied her in silence for a few beats. "You must see some bad situations in your job."

When was the last time a man had looked at her with such absolute focus, as if she was the most important thing in the world?

She couldn't remember.

But she liked it. A lot.

Slow and easy, Alison. Remember?

Right.

She eased slightly away. "No worse than what you've seen, I'm sure."

"Watching adults inflict damage on each other isn't fun, but seeing innocent children get hurt . . . that's a whole different ball game. How do you deal with it?"

He'd homed right in on the most troubling part of her job. The part that sometimes gave her nightmares.

"Not always very well. There are nights I lay awake worrying about children who've crossed my path. Wondering how they're being treated. If they'll end up on the streets." She frowned and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I love children, and seeing them in bad situations tears me up. They're so vulnerable, so easily victimized. Someone needs to see that justice is served on their behalf. To protect them. The job seemed like a good fit."

"Is it?"

"Yes. Most days."

"Cole tells me your oldest brother is a U.S. marshal. Interesting that all of you went into justice-related fields."

She smiled. "My dad can take the credit for that. He was a beat cop who did his very best every day to protect the innocent and defend justice. The world lost a good man when he died too young five years ago." Her voice hoarsened, and she swallowed. "I think all of his children inherited the justice gene."

"Not a bad legacy to pass on." Mitch folded his arms across his chest. "And what do you do at the end of the day to unwind?"

"Cook. Knit. Garden. I used to love to swim too, but that's still a little tough. I'm easing back into it, though. And since last summer, Bert has kept me occupied—and entertained."

His brow rippled for an instant—then smoothed out. "Oh yeah. Your dog. I'm sure he's a fine companion. But dogs do have their limitations."

She ignored his implication and turned the tables. "Now that you know my life story, tell me about Mitch Morgan. You grew up in St. Louis, right?"

"Yep. In a small house not too far from here. As a matter of fact, I'm living there now while I look for an apartment."

"What brought you back?"

"My dad. He had to have bypass surgery recently, which was a very tangible reminder that he's getting older—and that times change. I wasn't around much during the last years of my mom's life. I regret that now. So I wanted to be here more for him."

"You must have been a close family."

"We were. We used to call ourselves the Three Musketeers. I arrived long after my parents had given up hope of ever having a family, and I suspect that contributed to the closeness. We weren't wealthy in a material sense, but I had a very rich childhood."

A man who loved his parents. Who had his priorities and values straight.

Nice.

"How did your dad feel about you coming back?"

He gave her a crooked grin. "Happy on one hand. Guilt

ridden on the other. He thinks he's taking me away from my glamorous life." The grin faded. "Actually, he did me a favor. The so-called glamour was waning."

"Cole said you were a SEAL."

"For eight years."

"That's impressive."

He shrugged. "I liked to swim. I liked excitement. I wanted to serve my country. Being a SEAL seemed like the best way to accomplish all of that."

"Was it?"

"Yeah."

"So why did you leave?"

"My enlistment was up. And I'd seen enough action."

"So you took a quiet job with the NYPD SWAT team."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Cole must have been a font of information."

"Maybe he hoped your intriguing background would entice me to go out with you."

"It must have worked."

"Nope." The wedding party passed by, close enough for her to hear one of the groomsmen tease the newlyweds about getting started on the large family they wanted. A wave of melancholy washed over her, and she tuned out the conversation. "You know what clinched the deal? When he said you needed my help to dodge matchmaking attempts at the wedding."

"Ah. You have a soft heart."

"I thought we were talking about you?"

"I'm changing the subject."

"I noticed. Very smooth, sailor."

One side of his mouth hitched into a half smile. "I like a woman who can hold her own in a verbal sparring match."

Her neck grew warm. "My brothers don't."

"That's not what I hear."

"Yeah?" She shot him a skeptical look.

"Yeah. Cole sang your praises the night he used the sympathy card to convince me to take you to the wedding."

“You must have a soft heart too.”

“Let’s keep that our secret, okay?” He pushed off from the car, pressing the heel of his hand against the edge of the roof as he angled toward her. “And as far as sympathy goes, just for the record, that guy you were dating needs it more than you do. He lost out big-time when he let you get away.”

His comment filled her heart with warmth, chasing away her momentary melancholy. *Slow and easy, Alison.*

She summoned up a pert smile. “Cole should have warned me about your silver tongue. You have some great lines.”

“I happen to mean that one.” All levity vanished from his face. “Why did you two break up, anyway? If you don’t mind me asking.”

For some reason, she didn’t. “He couldn’t handle the long-term consequences of my accident. I had some . . . permanent damage.”

Twin furrows appeared on Mitch’s brow. She knew he was debating whether to ask the obvious follow-up question—and saved him the trouble by answering it.

“I had serious internal injuries.” She dropped her voice and tugged her shawl tighter. “David wanted children, and I’ll never be able to have them.”

The noise continued around them in the parking lot, but all at once it receded into the background. As if a clear curtain had dropped, insulating them from the world around them.

“He left you because of that?”

The chill in Mitch’s eyes—and his grim tone—took her off guard. “Having a family was important to him.”

“Hasn’t he ever heard of adoption?”

“That wasn’t for him.”

He didn’t respond. With words, anyway. Instead, he twined his lean, strong fingers with hers. “His loss.”

Her throat tightened. “Thank you. And for the record, I’m over him, despite what Cole might think. I have been for several months.”

“Good. That leaves room for someone else to step in.”

He hadn't said "me." But the implication was clear.

He squeezed her hand, and when he relinquished it, she missed his touch at once.

"Are you ready to call it a night? I promised to take my dad to church in the morning, and he likes the early service."

"Yes." She moved aside as he opened the door, then slipped into the car. All the while trying to analyze what had just happened. She'd never shared so much personal information with anyone on such short acquaintance. Nor felt such a strong attraction.

This was crazy.

Things were happening way too fast.

And now she had a dilemma on her hands. What should she do if he tried to kiss her good night?

If that issue was bothering Mitch, he gave no sign of it as he drove her home. His hand was steady on the wheel, his posture relaxed, his banter laid-back.

She, on the other hand, was a mass of nerves. By the time they pulled up in front of her house, she couldn't even remember what they'd talked about during the drive.

After braking to a stop, he switched off the ignition. "Sit tight. I'll get your door."

He slid out of the driver's seat, and a few seconds later her door was pulled open. Once she was on her feet, he took her arm and guided her up the concrete path toward her porch.

Still waging an internal debate about how to handle their parting, she took no notice of her surroundings as she groped in her purse for her keys—until Mitch spoke.

"Looks like you have another admirer."

She paused at the bottom of the three steps. What appeared to be a bouquet wrapped in green floral tissue lay in front of her door, illuminated by the light from the decorative lanterns on each side.

Stymied, she gaped at it. "Who on earth would be sending me flowers?"

"I think you've been holding out on me."

At his teasing comment, she ascended the steps. "Trust me . . . I haven't."

Mitch followed, bending down to retrieve the bouquet before she could reach for it. As he lifted it, the tissue gapped open to reveal the flowers inside. All of them wilted. The roses and carnations and daisies were not only well past their prime, their heads were drooping into the brown-edged filler fern.

Alison had never seen a sorrier bouquet.

"How strange." She pulled her shawl closer around her. "This wasn't here when we left, and it's not warm enough yet to kill flowers that fast. They must have been delivered looking like that."

When her comment produced no response, she looked up. Twin creases had appeared on Mitch's brow.

"Let's go in for a minute, okay?" He nodded toward the door.

So much for her quandary about how to handle a romantic overture. Based on his grim expression, the last thing on his mind was a good-night kiss.

In silence, she fitted the key in the lock.

He followed her across the threshold to the tune of loud beeps, shut the door behind them, and stuck close as she hurried to the back door to turn off the security system she'd activated before they left. An excited, muffled bark from the basement broke the stillness after the alarm went silent.

"I need to let Bert go outside for a few minutes."

"I'll go down and get him." He set the bouquet on the kitchen table and started for the basement door.

Her first inclination was to say she'd handle it. But in light of the unsettling vibes she was picking up from both Mitch and the creepy bouquet, she curbed that auto response. A solo trip to the basement wasn't all that appealing tonight.

Sixty seconds later, a happy yip from Bert and a rattle from the cage preceded the sound of mad scrambling on the steps. A heartbeat later, Bert scooted past her legs and careened through the kitchen. Mitch rejoined her at a more sedate pace, flashing a quick grin.

“There’s no energy shortage in this house.”

An answering smile tugged at her lips as she crossed to the back door and flipped the locks. No sooner had she cracked the door than Bert zipped past, disappearing into the shadows at the edge of her patio, past the range of her security lighting.

“He’ll scratch on the door when he’s ready to come back in.”

Mitch gave a brief nod, then gestured to the bouquet. “Mind if I see whether there’s a card?”

“Help yourself.”

He crossed to the café table in the small bay window and tore off the taped-together tissue. The cloying scent of decaying vegetation wafted toward her, and she took a step back.

Exposed to the light, the bouquet looked even more pathetic. As Mitch shifted it around, three withered petals from a lily, their color fading into transparency, drifted to the floor.

“No card.” Mitch straightened. “Any idea who might have sent them?”

She started to shake her head. Stopped. Frowned.

“You know . . . I have gotten three weird phone calls in the past couple of weeks. Maybe there’s a connection.”

“Define weird.” He pinned her with an intent look.

“All I hear is heavy breathing, then the person hangs up.”

“And you have no idea who might be behind those either?”

“No.”

“Have you told Cole?”

She grasped the back of a chair and lifted her chin. “No. I figured it was just a teenage prank, or someone who gets their kicks trying to scare people. If I tell Cole or Jake about it, they’ll turn it into a major case squad issue, insist on sleeping here at night, and escort me to and from work. They’ve always been overprotective, but since the accident last year they’ve been treating me like a fragile butterfly. I love them for caring, but I’ve had enough hovering to last a lifetime.” She waved a hand at the bouquet. “This kind of stuff isn’t dangerous. Just annoying.”

“Harassment is against the law. We could trace the calls.”

“There’s no need to do that. I have the numbers from the last two calls, thanks to caller ID.”

She crossed the kitchen and removed the small piece of paper from the corkboard by her phone. “I didn’t write down the number from the first call, but I have a feeling it came from the second number. It looked familiar when it flashed on caller ID.” She walked back and handed it to him.

After a quick glance, he flashed her a smile. “You’ve noted dates and times. Excellent.”

“My brothers trained me well.”

“It’s odd that your caller isn’t using call blocking.” He studied the numbers.

“I thought so too. I guess he’s using public phones.”

“Probably. But he’s still taking a chance. These calls place him in a certain spot at a certain time. There might be witnesses who could identify him.”

“He doesn’t seem to be worried about that.”

“The question is, why not?”

“I haven’t a clue.” She considered the flowers. “You know, it’s possible those are unrelated to the phone calls.”

“Possible, but not probable. The timing’s too close to be coincidental.” He fisted his hands on his hips. “And I don’t like the fact that this person has physically shown up at your house.”

She didn’t either, though she wasn’t about to admit that. She had state-of-the-art locks, well-placed exterior lighting, and an excellent security system. Cole had taken care of those defensive measures before she’d moved in two years ago. She also had Bert. Her best alarm system. Safety had never been a concern.

Until now.

Not that she planned to admit that either.

“I’m sure it’s just some prank, Mitch. I’m not worried.”

His gaze dropped to her white-knuckled grip on the back of the kitchen chair beside her. She loosened it at once—but it was too late.

“Okay, maybe I’m a little worried. But I don’t want to over-react. There might never be another incident.”

“That’s true. In the meantime, though, why don’t I check out these numbers? That might be all it takes to solve the mystery.”

She bit her lower lip and shot him a warning look. “I don’t want Cole in on this.”

“I’m okay with that. As long as it’s not an official investigation.” He withdrew a business card from his pocket. “Once we have the phone locations, we may be able to get a squad car there fast enough to spot the caller if you hear from him again. At the very least, the officer could ask around, see if there are any witnesses.” He held out the card. “Will you promise to call me immediately if he bothers you again? Day or night?”

As she took the card, their fingers brushed. The brief touch of warmth from his helped chase the chill from hers.

“I hate to bother you with this.”

“It’s no bother. Promise you’ll call either me or Cole.”

“I’d rather call you.”

“I’d prefer that too.” He smiled.

A jolt of electricity zipped between them, and Alison was grateful when a scratch on the door signaled Bert’s return—and diffused the charged atmosphere.

By the time she let him in, reset the locks, and turned back to Mitch, he’d picked up the flowers. “Why don’t I get rid of these?”

“No argument from me. There’s a trash can in my garage. Through there.” She indicated the door that led from the kitchen into the attached single-car structure.

He rejoined her moments later, brushing off his hands. Rather than stop in the kitchen, he continued toward the front door. “I should be going.”

She followed. “I had a nice evening.”

He paused at the threshold to smile at her. “I did too. In fact, I’m hoping it’s not a onetime event. Are you by any chance free for dinner next Friday night? I can promise you a better dining experience than roast beef and mostaccioli.”

He was asking her out on a real date.

This night was turning out far better than she'd expected. Despite the flowers.

"I'd like that. Very much."

His smile heated up a few degrees, and the room suddenly grew too warm. She let the shawl slip from her shoulders but resisted the urge to fan her face.

"I'll be in touch to arrange the details. In the meantime, be careful."

"You sound like Cole."

"I'm not sure I want to be compared to one of your brothers."

She grinned. "Trust me. I don't think of you as a brother."

He volleyed with a chuckle—and a look that was most unbrotherly. "That's nice to hear." He winked and opened the door. "Good night."

"Good night."

She set the lock, then peeked through the peephole, watching as he walked through the shadows with a spare, easy grace that had no doubt served him well as a SEAL. Wondering how many hearts he'd broken. A man like that didn't make it to his thirties without leaving more than a few in his wake.

And she didn't intend hers to be one of them.

Been there, done that.

But she wasn't averse to moving forward either. Slow and easy, of course. After all, he was a handsome, charming, intriguing man. And they'd clicked tonight—in spite of Cole, not because of him. Even though her brother would take the credit if things worked out.

"But his gloating would be a small price to pay, don't you think, Bert?" She scooped her furry companion into her arms and walked down the hall to her bedroom.

In reply, Bert snuggled close and made a contented sound deep in his throat.

She could only agree.