

Chapter One

‘Without evidence that this person intends to do you harm, Doctor Cutler, there’s just nothing we can do.’

Officer Ronson had been pleasant enough. Lyssa sat on one side of the bare desk with her best friend, Suzette Blossom, clutching her hand. Ronson and his young partner, Miguel Chavez, were probably sick of the sight of her. She’d been in this station half a dozen times over the course of the last four months and every time it was at the prompting of Suzette. Lyssa didn’t see any point in reporting each incident, certainly not anymore.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Suzette said. ‘She’s being terrorised.’

‘With all due respect Miss. Blossom, flowers being placed on someone’s back stairs doesn’t rank highly as being indicative of imminent harm.’

The officer was doing his job, and he had a point, but it was more than that. ‘What about the phone calls?’ Lyssa asked.

‘You said it had been a couple of weeks since he called,’ Ronson said.

‘Yes, but—’

‘Maybe your secret admirer isn’t as amorous as you fear.’

‘He prowls around outside her house,’ Suzette exclaimed, flattening her hands on the table.

Lyssa soothed her friend with a hand to her shoulder. ‘It is disconcerting to know that someone is in my yard.’

‘In the times you’ve called the police out to your home no one has been found on your property,’ Ronson said, consulting the file in front of him. ‘The same as the suspicious cars you and your friend have reported.’

‘You think I’m crazy,’ Lyssa muttered.

‘She’s a god damn psychiatrist! If she was crazy she’d be the first one to recognise the symptoms,’ Suzette said. ‘You people are supposed to protect the innocent.’

‘Keep filling out your diary,’ Ronson said, pushing Lyssa’s black notebook back to her. ‘And if you’re threatened or attacked then please call nine-one-one.’

‘What use is that after she’s been attacked?’ Suzette asked.

Her best friend was fiercely protective and saw how close to the end of her wick she had become, but flipping out wouldn’t get them anywhere. Lyssa took her purse from the floor and slid the strap up her arm as she stood up. The policemen stood up too and Lyssa had to take Suzette’s hand to bring her to her feet.

‘Thank you for your time,’ Lyssa said, picking up the notebook and tucking it into her purse with one hand. ‘We’d appreciate you leaving a note in the file that we reported this.’

‘Sure thing,’ Ronson said, smiling for the first time, no doubt because these women taking up his time were leaving.

Chavez opened the door for them and she took a silently seething Suzette through the precinct and out onto the sidewalk where the sun was beating down. Their car was parked around the block and to get her friend out of the sun and away from curious eyes, Lyssa cut down the alley at the side of the police building.

‘We should report those guys,’ Suzette grumbled.

‘Wait until we’re in the car before you lose it, Suzie,’ Lyssa said. ‘We’ll go somewhere nice for lunch.’ To calm her down a little, not that Lyssa would say that out loud, Suzie had a short fuse at the best of times.

‘Doctor Cutler?’

The voice from behind them made both women turn, still hand in hand. Miguel Chavez came out of a side doorway from the police station into the alleyway, alone. He took the time to look up and down the alley before he approached them.

‘Come to belittle us some more, have you?’ Suzette sniped.

'Ronson is old school,' Chavez said. 'He thinks stalking is a new fad.'

'And you don't?' Lyssa asked.

'I know... something about it.'

'Like what?'

'Like that you're not going to get very far here until you're hospitalised or dead, short of coming up with concrete evidence that this lunatic is on your tail.'

It was nice to be believed if nothing else. 'So you're here to tell me to stop wasting my time and yours?' Lyssa asked. 'Forgive me, but if I don't report the prowler's actions then he's getting away with it. What else am I supposed to do?'

'Visit someone who can help,' Chavez said and handed her a business card. Black cardboard with curly red writing on it listed the address of a nightclub called "Risqué". If the outline of the woman draped along the side of the card was anything to go by, it was a strip joint.

'A stripper?' Suzette asked. 'You want us to go to a stripper?'

'No,' Chavez said, moving in closer and lowering his voice. 'Go there tomorrow night, eleven PM, ask at the bar for Trapper.'

'Trapper?' Lyssa said.

'Trust me; he'll be able to help. Though if anyone asks where you got this information don't use my name.'

'Why not?' Suzette asked. 'Is he a superhero? A mercenary? Or a sniper, who will take this guy out with one shot? Pow!'

Lyssa tried not to laugh at her friend, and gave her hand a squeeze to settle her. 'I don't want to be the cause of anyone getting hurt.'

'Trapper's not security,' Chavez said. 'But he will solve your problem.'

'How will he do that?'

'Ask him.'

Chavez walked backward toward the door and then disappeared inside, leaving Lyssa and Suzette staring down at the business card.

'What do you think?' Lyssa asked.

'Is it too early for a drink?' Suzette asked.

Taking her friend's lead, they went back to the car and drove to their favourite restaurant only a block from the hospital Suzette worked at with her fiancé. Once they'd ordered and received their drinks Lyssa took the card from her pocket and placed it on the table.

'Is he setting us up?' Lyssa asked.

'For what?'

'I don't know. But I don't like the clandestine theatrics.'

'He's a cop,' Suzette said. 'He's probably got all sorts of contacts. If this Trapper guy can help then he's worth checking out.'

'Are we there yet? I mean, are we really that desperate?'

'You're a prisoner in your own home. I want Lyssa back, my Lyssa, the real Lyssa, the Lyssa who wouldn't think twice about wandering the streets at three AM. The Lyssa who would face off with bikers and boxers, who convinced an abusive husband to turn himself into the cops and be honest about his despicable deeds. Where is the Lyssa whose greatest aspiration was to write self-help books for us poor women clueless about the male mind?'

Lyssa smiled. 'I haven't given up on that.'

'No? You walked away from your marriage because your husband wouldn't support that dream.'

'Archie didn't like to see me taking what he perceived as risks,' Lyssa said. 'He didn't have confidence that I knew what I was doing.'

'Observing men in their natural habitat used to inspire you and when was the last time you went on one of your crazy crusades?'

'Studying male sexual behaviour can be done at any time. I suppose I haven't been motivated recently.'

'Because you think a stalker is watching your every move,' Suzette said, leaning back to let the server place their salads in front of them and disappear again. She leaned forward and took Lyssa's hand. 'I don't blame you. It must be terrifying to know some nut is obsessed with you. But you've put your life on hold for him.'

'I do find myself... concerned. But he's hardly a stalker, maybe he is just an admirer and doesn't mean any harm.'

'After your divorce from Archie you bought that beautiful townhouse in the city and set up your practice. You promised me that taking on patients was a stopgap to help you pay the bills while you wrote your books. Writing was always your passion, the only reason you went to medical school was to appease your father.'

'That's not entirely true,' Lyssa said, used to hearing her friend's rhetoric.

Her parents had scrimped and saved all of their lives and expected their only child to use her intelligence wisely. Watching her graduate had been their greatest achievement. Though their happiest day was probably watching her marry the rich plastic surgeon... shame that hadn't lasted. Telling them that her marriage was over had been the hardest day of her own life.

Her intention had always been to study the mind, psychology fascinated her, and she'd chosen to specialise in sexual dysfunction. Since then she'd never looked back. Her main focus was male patients, but she worked with females and couples too. In her practice she had a variety of patients ranging from those with simple marital issues, to victims of sexual abuse and assault.

'I want you to write your books,' Suzette said. 'Get inspired, throw yourself into an assignment, study your subjects up close, undercover, just like you used to.'

Lyssa wanted it to be that simple, but with this admirer on her tail she found herself more aware of her own movements, and her own vulnerability. 'I'm still writing and rewriting previous findings.'

'But not studying anyone new, or putting yourself in any new and exciting environments,' Suzette said. 'You're not going to do that until we get rid of this guy. I know you, Lyssa. You have to move on from this and find yourself again.'

The only way that Lyssa could move forward was to free herself from the scrutiny of her the person obsessed with her. But going to a stranger and asking for help didn't sit well with her. Lyssa liked to know that she was making a difference in steering her destiny. Playing the hapless or helpless victim wasn't in her nature, and it was frustrating that this stalker had reduced her to that.

'Ok,' she said to Suzette. 'I'll think about it.'

For now that would have to do, because she liked to be absolutely sure before making a decision. Once she committed Lyssa had a habit of jumping in at the deep end. This opportunity wouldn't be far from her mind between now and rendezvous time Chavez had indicated, and she had a whole day of patients to get through tomorrow.

