

SEEKING SANCTUARY

PRAISE FOR

RIPPED FROM OBSCURITY

RT Book Reviews Top Pick

4.5 stars: “Ashland writes a compelling tale featuring a sexy cowboy who steals a beautiful, spunky author’s heart. This page-turner with swoon-worthy moments, twists, and suspense will keep readers enthralled to the end.”

—*RT Book Reviews Top Pick*

5 stars: “Ashland nailed the push/pull of a great romance while keeping the suspense element tight. Bought it and stayed up way too late reading to the end. Selena isn’t the only one mesmerized by Tucker’s southern charm!”

—*Amazon review – Mar*

5 stars: “I loved this book! The wonderful love story of Selena and Tucker was woven with personal loss and a conspiracy that kept me guessing until the very end. So glad to have found the second installment in the U-District series.”

—*Goodreads review – Sailorswife*

5 stars: “*Obscurity* is a terrific blend of action, suspense, mystery, and romance. Loved the surprising elements that were revealed as the plotline developed. The intriguing portrayal of Tucker and Selena made them truly memorable and compelling characters. A most entertaining read!”

—*Amazon review – CJR*

5 stars: “Had trouble putting the book down; it was thoroughly enthralling. Characters were very well written and developed. Story very engaging. Waiting impatiently for *Seeking Sanctuary!*”

—*Amazon review – tmb*

PRAISE FOR *SECRETS AT SYNERGY*

5 stars: “An amazingly entertaining book that kept me reading until 4 a.m. in the morning to finish... Jodi Ashland does a stunning job on this novel! She kept me intrigued from page one to the end.... The chemistry between Bryce and Jade was perfect! It wasn’t too sudden nor was it dragged out... This book had my heart racing from beginning to end and I absolutely love it!... This is a wonderful mystery and romance story that is a definite must read!”

—*Goodreads review – Sarah J. Y. C*

5 stars: “Loved the pace: got me interested, set the hook and reeled me in. Good combo of action/suspense/romance. Well written and loved the Seattle references. Hunk meter is high—does Bryce have a brother?”—*Amazon review – M. McDonough*

4 stars: “First off, I don’t normally read suspense, but this was so good I couldn’t put it down. Loved the pace: got me interested from the word go. [The] scene was set, then hook line and sinker, I was a goner. Good combo to make in my words perfection: action/suspense/romance and red-hot electricity.”

—*Goodreads review – Stacey*

5 stars: “Love this book... couldn’t put it down. This is my first book from this author... love the characters so much... [It’s] a must-buy.... You won’t regret [it].”

—*Goodreads review – Lisa G*

5 stars: “Planned on reading a few pages, but sat up all night and finished it!!!”

—*Amazon review – tmb*

4 stars: “I love Bryce! Give me a brooding hero any day with danger thrown in. Great chemistry and tension between Jade and Bryce make this an absorbing read during a hot summer.”

—*Amazon review – Happily Ever After Girl*

5 stars: “The sexual tension between [Jade] and her coworker Bryce made me continue reading for hours. Seriously, I kept reading until I fell asleep with the book beside me.... The conflict and romance kept me constantly intrigued, and I would recommend this to a friend in a heartbeat.”—*Amazon review – Skisocks*

ALSO BY JODI ASHLAND

U-District Series

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Seeking Sanctuary (coming August 2018)

Harper Security Series

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SEEKING SANCTUARY

U-DISTRICT
BOOK 3



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ISBN (print): 1-943372-03-9
ISBN-13 (print): 978-1-943372-03-4
ISBN (ebook): 1-943372-05-5
ISBN-13 (ebook): 978-1-943372-05-8

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Book cover design by damonza.com

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Duvall Press logo design by damonza.com

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Editing, proofreading, and print formatting:
By Your Side Self-Publishing
www.ByYourSideSelfPub.com

Published by Duvall Press

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CHAPTER 1

BETWEEN A KILLER STALKING THE STREETS and her detective taking her “no commitment” comment seriously, what’s a girl to do? Ooh, Aleks wanted to drop-kick the cell phone out her second-story apartment window and watch it blast to smithereens on the Seattle street below.

How idiotic was she, pining away for the past three weeks, hoping Neal would call? She’d told him it was just a one-night stand. Couldn’t he tell she’d only been saying that? Didn’t he understand that she’d chosen him? So what if she hadn’t left her number, a serious slip on her part. He knew how to get in touch with her—could even ask her best friend, Jade, if he wanted to.

Oh, who was she kidding? It wasn’t like Detective Neal Hawkins didn’t know how to track people down. He just wasn’t interested—plain and frickin’ simple. He’d said he was trying to start a relationship with a nurse. Obviously, their night together hadn’t changed his mind. Aleks sighed. At least Neal had been honest with her. One of the many reasons she liked him so much.

She switched off the television, her foot tapping the carpet. *Run*. She really needed to run. It had been over a week since she’d been out for a jog. The U-District Strangler had the entire city freaking out. There had been no new victims in the past two weeks; some speculated that he had moved on.

Stuck inside because of that psycho? Not happening. What had she taken self-defense classes for? Let him try to come after her.

That taunting voice, the one from the past, whispered in her ear: *You know what can happen, Aleks. You know.*

Stop it. Just stop.

With a shake of her head, Aleks grabbed her running shoes from the bedroom floor by her nightstand. After strapping her smartphone on one arm and pepper spray on the other, she laced up her sneakers and took off.

The early September night was warm by Seattle standards. She wiped her brow. Sticking to the sidewalks was the safe thing to do as she headed to the University of Washington, where there was campus security. She’d run for an hour and get back by seven, before the sun went down.

See? She was being sensible. Not reckless like she’d been on that *other* night so long ago.

She took a deep breath to squash the flutters in her abdomen. *I’m safe*. Selecting her favorite playlist, she put her earbuds in and started her jog, timing her steps to “My Songs Know What You Did in the Dark” by Fall Out Boy.

The campus couldn’t have come soon enough. She despised weaving around people on the city sidewalks, although she did have to jump over a few downed branches on the university’s grounds from the latest windstorm. Here the campus was relatively empty, with only a few people hanging out on the lawns. Summer was over, and fall quarter would start on Monday, just three days away. She was so ready to go back to school and start her junior year. So ready to own a bachelor’s degree, and then she could start law school. So ready to make law-breaking

bastards pay for their crimes.

Reaching the end of the campus, she checked her pulse and headed to the paved twenty-mile Burke-Gilman trail that ran along the shore of Lake Washington. It was more crowded here, and she had to frequently change her pace to get around the cyclists, walkers, and other runners. Her mind went blank as her breathing settled into a rhythm.

“All of Me” by John Legend rang through the headset. Aleks couldn’t help it. Neal popped back into her mind with his deep hazel eyes, short sand-colored hair, and muscular arms that she’d enjoyed digging her nails into. She’d given herself to *him* that night because he’d needed comfort.

She bit her lip. Who was she kidding? She’d really needed him.

Why couldn’t she find a kind, honest, noble man like Neal? When she’d been in his arms, she’d felt totally safe. Neal would never hurt her *that* way.

Never.

Aleks reached an opening in the trail where multimillion-dollar houses and one-hundred-foot-tall cedar trees parted to provide a view of the lake. The sun was low in the sky, its final rays casting a beautiful reflection over the water and a pink glow onto Mt. Rainier. What would it be like to be on one of those sailboats, sitting beside Neal with a bottle of beer in one hand and his arm wrapped around her as they watched the sun go down?

Down.

Oh no! She sucked in an involuntary breath. She’d run too far, forgotten about the time. Whirling around, Aleks bolted back in the direction she’d come, almost slamming into another jogger.

Should I take the shortcut and get back before dark, or take the safe route?

The safe route. It was the smart thing to do.

Her muscles tensed as she headed back to the university. The trail was becoming deserted, with only the occasional home security light to show the way after the sun dipped below the horizon.

She relaxed once she was back on campus, the open grounds providing a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view. Despite the feeling of security, she wasn’t going to be an idiot.

She’d been stupid once. One time, and it had cost her.

Chills prickled along her arm as she turned off the music, pulled out her earbuds, and stopped to zip them into the back pocket of her running shirt. She was on full alert. The sun was slipping behind the Olympic Mountains, and dusk was rapidly turning to nightfall. Resuming her jog, she slowed her pace to keep her breathing light, so she could hear clearly around her. Besides, it was a good idea to conserve her energy in case she needed to sprint like a mad dog.

A construction barricade along the trail forced her to cut across McDermott Plaza in front of the Physics Astronomy Tower. She ran past the shrubs and jumped over a branch.

A movement near the bushes caught her attention.

She turned to look as she jogged by.

What was that?

It was dark; her mind was playing tricks on her. So why did she stop?

Her heart was thudding hard, and not just from the jogging. Something wasn't right.

There was a thrashing in the bushes, a muffled moan. Aleks struggled to catch her breath. She *had* seen something.

Someone was back there. And something bad was happening.

She froze, every cell in her body screaming, *Run!*

But she couldn't leave and live with herself.

Not after what had happened.

Her pulse racing, she fought against the shaking that tried to take over her body. Gulping down air, she walked back with silent steps.

A man was crouching over a woman on the ground.

Oh please, no!

Nausea threatened to take over, but she fought it down. With sweat-slicked hands, Aleks grabbed the branch she'd jumped over earlier. She could use it as a weapon. Her trembling fingers dialed 911 on the cell phone strapped to her arm.

"911, please state your emergency."

"He's killing her." Aleks raised the branch overhead and brought it down just as the man in black turned to see her. "Get off her, you son of a bitch!" She slammed the branch onto his back again. "Get off her!"

He fell to the side, rolled, and bounced up, ready to attack. Metal glinted in the moonlight. He had a knife.

She swung the branch with all her might and didn't miss his hand. The blade went flying.

"Ma'am, please state your location."

"U-Dub McDermott—" Her jaw exploded with pain and tears flooded her eyes when a fist hit her square in the mouth. Aleks stumbled back, her arms flailing. She screamed, but somehow didn't lose her footing. *Remember your training.* She hunkered into the defensive position, one foot in front of the other and her feet spread apart for balance.

He swung at her again. She blocked the blow with the branch.

"Ma'am, the police are on their way. Ma'am, are you all right?" The voice on the speakerphone was faint.

He came at her again, but hesitated when multiple sirens blared to life in the distance.

Aleks grabbed her pepper spray and aimed for the whites of his eyes, the only thing visible through the ski mask.

She hit her mark. He stumbled back, grabbing his face and howling.

Swinging the branch again, she clipped him in the arm. She had to take him down.

He nearly lost his balance, but regained his footing.

"Police. Freeze!" A dark silhouette of a man came running toward them in the distance.

The attacker bolted in the other direction.

"That's right"—Aleks sucked in a deep, agonizing breath—"run away, you coward rat bastard!"

The police officer sprinted after her attacker.

Aleks dropped the branch, her chest heaving. *The girl.* Was she okay? With

hesitant steps, she walked over to the girl, who was facedown with a plastic bag over her head. She wasn't moving.

Aleks's stomach lurched. "Please don't be dead." She sucked in a deep breath, knelt down, and pulled the plastic away from the girl's face. Aleks leaned over, trying to hear if she was breathing.

All she could hear was the pounding of her own heart.

With a shaking hand, she tried to find a pulse in the girl's neck. Nothing.

She grabbed the girl's wrist, her fingers frantic, pressing harder into the girl's clammy skin.

Still nothing.

Her vision started to blur, her body began to shake, and soon dizziness would engulf her. Her brain was shutting down, taking her away from this horror, taking her to her safe place. Aleks sat back and drew her knees to her chest. She wrapped her arms around her legs and started rocking. "Please don't be dead. Please don't be dead. Please don't be dead."



DETECTIVE NEAL HAWKINS GOT THE MESSAGE loud and clear. His partner, Jim Riley, had confirmed there was another U-District Strangler victim and a possible witness. Neal had already been close to Swedish Hospital for personal reasons when the call had come in.

The victim had survived.

Not that it was his to work, but it was the department's first break in the high-profile case. A case so-named by the media, who'd mistakenly reported that the women had been strangled, but the reality was the victims had been suffocated with high-density polyethylene plastic bags, or run-of-the-mill grocery store bags, a detail his department had intentionally not disclosed to avoid copycats.

Neal rubbed the gunshot wound just below his left shoulder. Over a month to heal, and the damn thing still hurt. The reason he remained on desk duty. Not to mention Cap was more than a little ticked about the stunt he'd pulled with the FBI last week—like not saving his sister had even been an option.

Along with every other law-enforcement officer in the city, Neal wanted to find this killer. His partner had a potential witness. It was about time they caught a break.

Neal walked up to the reception area in the ER. "Hi Nancy, can you see if Kenzie is available?"

"Sure, handsome, just a sec." Nancy didn't question why he was here. He'd been coming by to see Mackenzie Ballinger a lot these days. Their shifts rarely coincided, so if seeing her meant a visit to the hospital where she worked, then so be it. He tapped his fingers on the countertop.

A few moments later, Kenzie was strolling up to him. "Well, look who it is." She smiled, crinkling the edges of her stunning green eyes. "My favorite detective." Her red curls were pulled back in a ponytail, showing off her cute freckles, and although her long legs were covered by her blue nurse's scrubs, he could still picture how great they looked in a pair of shorts. "What brings you here?"

"They're bringing in another U-District Strangler victim. She's still alive."

The smile fled from Kenzie's face. "Oh, thank goodness. You need to find this

guy, Neal. You all need to find this guy.”

“We’ve got everyone working on it.”

“Are *you* working on it?” She placed her hand on his good shoulder.

“Yeah, from a desk, but it’s better than nothing. At least they’re keeping me informed now.”

“You’re still taking the pain meds I got for you?”

“Yes, doc.”

Kenzie playfully smacked his shoulder. “You know they’re helping.”

Neal smiled. “They are. They dull the pain just enough.” He linked his fingers with hers. “Any chance you and I can play hooky one day soon?”

“Hmm, what did you have in mind? The last time you took me to Whidbey Island, it got a little tense.”

Yeah, that had been for his sister. “No case this time. Just you and me.”

She smiled and stepped in close to him, her mouth mere inches from his. “I’d like that very much.”

He looked down at those luscious lips. “If this wasn’t your place of employment, I’d kiss you right now.”

A smile lit up her eyes, and then all hell broke loose behind them.

Two paramedics wheeled in a gurney with six police officers on their tail. One of the paramedics shouted the victim’s stats to a nurse.

Kenzie rushed over. “I’ll get the IV cart.”

Riley walked in with his arm around a woman, so small next to his bodybuilder frame. The purple and hot-pink streaks in her hair were all too familiar. A cold sensation settled into the pit of Neal’s stomach. When she raised her gaze from the floor, her eyes were glazed over and her mouth was bleeding.

“Aleks?” Neal couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

With her name still in the air between them, her eyes finally focused. On him. Ducking out from under Riley’s arm, Aleks ran across the room and flung her arms around Neal, her petite body jarring his injured shoulder. But that didn’t matter.

Before he could think better of it, he wrapped his arms around her. She shivered against him, her breathing ragged. He looked at his partner. “Shit, what happened to her?”

Riley eyed the way she was clinging to him. “She’s the witness. You know her?”

Witness? “Her name is Aleksandra Levin. She’s a friend of Jade Buchanan’s.”

“The embezzlement case that got you shot?”

“The one and only.”

“And you two?” Riley’s eyes shifted back and forth between him and Aleks.

“Yes.” Dammit. He was now off the case entirely because he had a personal connection to the witness.

Aleks’s shaking intensified, and Neal pulled her closer. “What the hell happened?”

“Don’t know. Campus police found her at the scene on the ground by the vic. She was nearly catatonic until she saw you.”

“Tell me campus police can ID the killer.”

“No such luck. The university is between quarters, so security was light. A patrolman heard screaming, and by the time he got there, the attacker had disappeared into the shadows. Your girl!”—he glanced down at Aleks—“called

nine-one-one. The operator was still on the line when we got there. The whole incident was recorded.”

Neal glanced down at Aleks, but all he could see was the top of her ruffled hair. Her face was buried in his chest, and she clung to him so tightly, he wouldn't be surprised if he developed hand-shaped bruises on his back. “Is she hurt?”

“Just her lip is all I could see. But she needs to be checked.”

Neal's gaze turned to Kenzie, who was walking toward him. She was staring at him with Aleks in his arms. Shit.

“Kenzie.” Riley motioned her over. “She needs to be seen right away, and we need to question her when she's ready.”

Kenzie nodded and placed a gentle hand on Aleks's back. “Aleks, it's Kenzie, Bryce's cousin... Jade's fiancé.”

Neal's shoulders went rigid. *Kenzie knows Aleks? Could this possibly get any worse?*

When Aleks seemed to register her best friend's name, Kenzie continued. “I'm here to help you see a doctor.”

Aleks shook her head. She didn't want to let him go.

Neal placed his hand under her chin and gently directed her gaze to his. “Aleks, go with Kenzie. She'll get you help.”

More tears sprung to her eyes.

“No one is going to hurt you here. You're safe.”

She tightened her grip on him and shook her head, her eyes growing wide with panic.

“Will it help if I stay with you?”

Aleks lightened her grip the barest bit.

He took that as a yes and looked up at Riley.

Riley agreed with a single nod. “Looks like our only play. Let's do it.”

Neal walked Aleks back to an exam room. For once, he wished Kenzie wasn't anywhere near. “Awkward” didn't even begin to describe this situation. “Why don't you sit here?” He motioned Aleks to a chair.

Muffled sobs wracked her slender body as she sank into the chair.

“Hey, shh, you're okay. You're safe.” He gently ran a hand through her hair.

Riley waited outside for the doctor, then opened the door. “This is Doctor Walker.”

The doc was female. Good. He stepped away from Aleks. “I'll be right outside while Doctor Walker examines you.”

Aleks gripped him around the wrists, her nails biting into his skin.

“Aleks, honey, look at me.” He placed both hands on the sides of her face and waited until she looked him in the eyes. “I need to know that you're all right. Can you do this for me? I'll be right outside the door. I'm not going anywhere.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She nodded, or maybe it was her body shaking; he couldn't quite tell. When she released her grip, he took that as consent and stepped into the hallway.

Riley closed the door behind him. Then he looked at Neal, a smirk on his lips. “Honey?”

Neal swiped a hand down his face. “It seemed like the right thing to say at the time.”

“What’s with you two? I thought you had a thing with Kenzie.”

“I do. At least I hope I still do.” Neal shifted his weight, Riley’s dark eyes boring into him. “Aleks and I were together a few weeks back. I haven’t seen her since.” Heat blazed over his cheeks, but he didn’t look away.

Riley raised an eyebrow. “A one-nighter? Man, I didn’t think you did that sort of thing.”

“I don’t.”

“Just once.” A smirk was starting on Riley’s lips.

Neal crossed his arms. Riley might be with a new woman every other week, but that wasn’t how Neal wanted to end up.

“And Kenzie knows the witness.”

“Appears that way.”

“And she knows you two...?”

Dammit, he really didn’t need his partner knowing about this. He’d never live it down. “Kenzie knows I was with someone. She didn’t know with who until today.”

The smirk took full bloom. “Well, doesn’t that put you in a bind.”

Neal glared at his partner. “Bite me.”

Riley laughed and placed a hand on Neal’s good shoulder. “You’re going to be pulled off the case, buddy.”

“I know.” Neal shoved his hands in his pockets. “Let Cap know what’s going on, but you need to keep me informed.”

The smirk disappeared and Riley nodded. “You know I have your back.”

Neal never doubted it for a second. “Thanks, man. Where’s your partner?”

“You’re my partner.”

“Not until I’m off desk duty.”

“Junior has food poisoning.”

Neal cringed. “Figures. A break on the biggest case of the decade and he’s AWOL.” The squad didn’t particularly like Declan Moore Jr., who’d been a beat cop for only two years before making detective. And it wasn’t his extraordinary prowess that had landed him the job. Having police commissioner Declan Moore Sr. for a father had its benefits. Still, Neal wouldn’t wish food poisoning on the guy.

The doc came out of the exam room. “Detective Riley, I found no severe physical injuries. Just the contusion around Ms. Levin’s mouth and several bruises on her arm. Her lips are cut inside, but nothing that needs stitches.”

Neal let out an audible sigh of relief.

“Can we talk to her now?” Riley asked.

“Not until mental health services evaluates her. She’s been traumatized.”

Shit, shit, shit. Neal didn’t want to hear that, but he’d known it just by looking at Aleks.

The doc turned to him. “I suggest you go back in there, Detective Hawkins. You seem to be the only one who can keep her calm. She refused a sedative.”

“Go ahead.” Riley opened the door, but didn’t follow him in. “If she talks, you can relay it to me.”

Aleks sat on the table in a hospital gown with her head sagging between her shoulders. Her tears hadn’t stopped.

Kenzie pulled her hand away from Aleks’s shoulder and looked at him. “Take

care of her.”

“I will.” Their eyes locked, each trying to say something without saying it in front of Aleks. He didn’t deserve Kenzie; she’d done the math, and yet she still understood that he needed to help Aleks, even expected it of him. But at what cost? He didn’t want to hurt either one. He started to say something more, but Kenzie shook her head and glanced at Aleks, who’d started sobbing again.

We’ll talk later, he mouthed to Kenzie.

She nodded, her eyes soft, and closed the door silently behind herself.

Aleks grabbed a fistful of his shirt again, pulling him toward the exam table. Neal wrapped his arms around her and let her cry on his chest. “You’re safe. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.” He ran his hands up and down her back until her sobs faded to sniffles.

The door opened.

Aleks jumped like she’d been electrocuted, almost throwing Neal off-balance. He glanced over his shoulder and recognized their visitor, then looked down at Aleks.

“It’s okay. This is Keiko from the King County Medical Examiner’s office. She and I are good friends. She’s just going to check you for evidence, swab for DNA, that kind of thing. I’ll be right outside.”

Neal quietly stepped out the door and over to his partner. “You called Keiko in?”

Riley nodded. “Need-to-know-only on this one. Gotta keep the survivor and witness under wraps. Tatiana from CSI wasn’t available, and Keiko’s already on the case from the first vic.”

“Good call.” Keiko’d keep this quiet.

“Is Aleks any better?” Riley asked.

“She stopped crying.”

“Guess that’s a good sign.”

Neal shrugged. There was nothing good about this situation. They had a killer on the loose, one who could possibly be ID’d by Aleks, which meant she was now in danger. Aleks Levin didn’t exactly blend in with the crowd. Her spiky black hair with its purple and pink streaks might as well have been a blinking neon sign. If the killer caught sight of her again, she’d be his next victim.

Riley shifted. “He’s going to come after her.”

Neal’s stomach tightened. “Yep.”

“That’s when we’ll get him.”

“Damn straight.” They had to. Letting Aleks get hurt wasn’t an option.

Riley answered his vibrating cell phone. “What’ve you got?” He glanced at Neal, then said, “Play it,” to whomever had called. As he listened, Riley’s face took on the look he got when he was pissed, really pissed. It wasn’t an expression Neal saw often. Riley stared at him again. “Damn, your girl’s a fighter.”

What was Riley listening to?

“Play it again,” Riley said into the phone, and then handed it to him.

Neal listened to the nine-one-one call Aleks had made. When he heard the impact of a fist on flesh and Aleks’s scream, his jaw clenched and his hand balled up. What he wouldn’t give to beat the last breath out of this asshole right now.

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Take it easy.” Riley squeezed his shoulder and took the phone out of his hand.

“She went after him.” Neal said the words as his mind put together the pieces. “She caught him in the act and went after him.”

“She’s damn brave. Or she has a death wish.”

Neal couldn’t imagine petite little Aleks going after a man like that. She could’ve been killed. Instead, she’d saved a woman’s life.

Keiko came out of the room just as the new resident shrink, Doc Baker, from mental health services arrived. “You can go in.”

Baker nodded once and slipped into Aleks’s room.

While Keiko was of Japanese-American descent with a petite frame, dark hair falling to her waist, and penetrating eyes, Doc Baker was a voluptuous blonde with her hair pulled into a tight bun and black-rimmed glasses over her blue eyes.

“Did you find anything?” Riley asked Keiko.

“It’s too soon to tell. I swabbed her cheeks and under her nails, but I didn’t see any tissue. I’m hoping to find hair or fibers on her clothing.” She lifted a bag filled with Aleks’s clothes. “Did she tell you what happened? She wouldn’t talk to me.”

Neal shook his head. “No, but the nine-one-one tape gave us a pretty good picture. She must have jogged past the perp in the act, and then she called it in and attacked him.”

“She attacked him?” Keiko’s eyebrows rose. “That’s a new one. I’ll let you know when I have anything.”

Neal watched Keiko walk down the hallway before he started pacing. He rarely saw Keiko surprised.

Finally, Doc Baker came out of the room. “Detectives.”

“How is she?” Neal asked.

“She’s in shock. I’m afraid she has acute post-traumatic stress. It’s unlikely she’ll talk anytime soon. What is your relationship with her?” The shrink addressed Neal.

He forced himself to meet her gaze. “Uh, we were together a while back.”

“Her parents are somewhere in Europe. We’re trying to get ahold of them. We’re going to keep her overnight. Is there anyone we should call?”

“We’ll take care of that,” Riley said. “We need to keep the fact that we have a witness under the radar.”

Neal walked to the door of the exam room. “I’ll call her best friend, Jade, and see if Aleks has any other family in the area. Can I stay with her now?” Neal asked the shrink.

“I’m afraid you don’t have a choice, Detective. You’re the only one she trusts. If you leave her now, she may retreat deeper to protect herself.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good.” Doc Baker provided a curt smile and walked away.

Riley turned to Neal after checking out the shrink’s ass. “I’m going to have to tell Cap about this.”

“Go ahead. But I’m not here on duty. I’m here as someone who cares about Aleks.”

“Understood.”

The captain could order him off the case, but he couldn't interfere with his personal life. Perhaps Aleks would be safer under these circumstances. He wouldn't be able to stay close to her in uniform. But this way, he could watch over her.

And one mistake was all they needed to take down the killer.

CHAPTER 2

ALEKS OPENED HER EYES and blinked.

Am I dreaming?

Why would Neal be sitting in a chair next to her with his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes closed?

Is he asleep?

When she moved her hand, something tugged on her arm. What the...? A clear plastic tube was taped to her forearm. She glanced around at her surroundings.

Why am I in the hospital?

Neal stretched in his chair. "Good, you're awake."

An image of a girl's dead body flashed through her mind. She bolted upright. "She's dead! Neal, she's dead!"

He reached for her. "It's okay. She's alive."

She gripped his arms and started hyperventilating. "You have to find her. You can't leave her there."

"She's alive."

"No, I saw her body." She shook her head. "You have to find her."

Neal cupped her face in his hands and forced her to look at him. "She's here, in the hospital... alive. You saved her life."

"She's alive?"

He nodded.

She's alive.

Aleks collapsed onto the pillow and sucked in deep breaths.

The door opened and a uniformed officer peered in.

"She's fine." Neal addressed him. "She just had a panic attack."

The officer nodded and pulled the door closed.

Aleks grabbed his hand. "Why are there police outside my door?"

He placed his other hand on top of hers. His warmth seeped into her, chasing away the chill. "There was another attack last night. You were there."

"I—" All she could see was the girl with the bag over her head. "I remember

finding her. It's him, isn't it?"

"You stopped him before he could kill her. But it's the same MO. We believe it's him."

"Why can't I remember?"

"You're in shock."

The door opened and Kenzie came in. Two cops stood outside. Kenzie leaned over the bed and offered Aleks a hug. "How's our girl?"

Aleks wrapped an arm around her. "Okay, I guess."

"I'm glad. You had us worried there for a while." Kenzie took her wrist and checked her pulse. "Your vitals look good; you'll be out of here in no time." She smiled and then typed something on the computer. "I'm going to see if they'll release you."

Neal stood. "Kenzie, wait a sec." He walked with her to the door, leaned in close, and said something in her ear. Kenzie placed a hand on his arm and smiled. Only it was a sad smile.

Aleks's stomach did a free fall. "You are frickin' kidding me," Aleks said when Neal sat down next to her.

"What?"

"Kenzie's the ER nurse you're dating?"

"We're not officially dating yet, but yes."

"I never would have—we wouldn't have—if I'd known it was Kenzie."

"I know." Neal's eyes fell to the floor. "I didn't realize you two knew each another until last night."

"Does she know?"

He looked at her for a moment. "Yes."

"I feel like a total slut."

"Don't. Don't do that to yourself, or to me, or to her. No one meant any harm here."

"This sucks."

"Yes it does."

"So now what? Why are the police still here? Why are *you* here?"

Neal sat on the bed next to her and pulled her hand to his.

Uh-oh, this isn't going to be good.

"Aleks, I need to talk to you, but you can't check out on me again."

Her eyebrows drew together. What was he talking about? When did she check out on him?

"You weren't just at the scene of the crime. You called nine-one-one and fought him off."

A laugh escaped her lips, not a funny ha-ha laugh, but the kind that says yeah-right-and-you-wear-ballerina-slippers.

"Nine-one-one recorded the whole thing." His voice was serious.

Her smile began to disappear. "I—I don't remember."

"I know. You were pretty much catatonic last night. I'm here because you wanted me to be. But I can leave if you'd like."

"No." Why did that have to come out sounding so desperate? "I mean, it's okay that you're here."

He smiled, understanding in his hazel eyes. He knew she wanted him here. She

didn't know if that was a good thing or not. "The police are here to protect you. As a witness... he's going to come after you."

He seemed to be gauging whether she was going to freak out or not. "Did I hurt him?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good." Triumph seeped through her veins and deep into her soul. She hadn't been a victim this time, and she'd saved that girl's life.

Neal leaned forward. "They want to move you to a safe house and put you under police protection."

"No way." She crossed her arms over her chest. Well, one arm; the other had an IV stuck in it. "That creep is *not* taking control of my life." Never again would she give someone complete control over her.

"It's just until we get this guy."

"No." If Neal thought that cute smile of his would change her mind, he was sadly mistaken.

He turned all serious. "Aleks, he could have killed you last night, and he's going to try again."

"No."

"You're stubborn, you know that?"

"Yes."

He laughed. "What am I going to do with you?" He rubbed a hand through his hair, his eyes narrowed in thought. "Well, you can't stay at your place. If he finds out your name, that will be the first place he goes."

"How would he find out who I am? Having police guard dogs outside my room is a dead giveaway, but if I just go on with my life, how would he even know?"

"Aleks," he said, as if the reason were obvious.

"What?" Panic started to bubble to the surface. "It's all over the news, isn't it?"

"No, we've been able to keep it under wraps. There aren't many people who know about you, but..." He reached up and slid his fingers through her multicolored spiked hair.

"Oh." She resisted the urge to melt into his touch.

"You don't blend into the shadows, which is great. But in this case, if he got a good look at you last night, it won't take him much to figure out who you are."

Goose bumps rose on her arms. Had the attacker been able to see her clearly? She couldn't remember anything except jogging home as the sun went down, a woman's body, and then whammo, she'd woken up in this hospital bed. Why couldn't she remember? "Okay." She sighed in defeat. "I'll stay at my parents' place. They're in Italy with my younger brother anyway."

"Riley said you have an older brother."

"I—don't talk to him." *Keep it together.* She let out her breath slowly and tried to sound upbeat. "I heard Mom say he was in California visiting a friend."

"Do you want me to call your parents and ask them to come home?"

"No way." She said that a little too harshly. *Stay calm.* "They saved up a long time for this trip, and there's nothing they can do for me. You guys just need to find this sicko and lock him up for good."

“We will.” He smiled and leaned back in his chair, taking the warmth with him.

“When can I go home?”

“Soon. Jade brought some fresh clothes for you.”

“She was here?”

“Last night.”

Holy cow. He wasn't kidding when he said she'd checked out. And how frickin' embarrassing was it that she did it with Neal around?

“Your clothes are in the closet. Get dressed, and we'll escort you to your place to pick up your things. Jade said you have a roommate. She can't stay there either. Just being there could put her in danger too.” Neal stepped out of the room.

Aleks waited for the door to close. She reached for her smartphone and scrolled through her playlist until she found “Numb” by Linkin Park. She cranked up the volume, put her earbuds in, and then wrapped her arms around her legs and started rocking. She focused on the back and forth motion and the beat of the music, willing the trembling in her body to go away.

She couldn't “check out,” as Neal had called it. It had been a long time since she'd done that. She couldn't go back to that place, ever again. She couldn't lose herself. She couldn't be a victim.

Because there was no guarantee she'd be able to put the pieces together a second time.

CHAPTER 3

THE STUPID BITCH WAS GOING TO PAY for interfering. He splashed water over his eyes again. They'd burned like hell last night, and this morning they were still red and swollen. He'd have to miss work. There was no way he could be seen like this.

He'd made a mistake, let the rush of adrenaline make him sloppy. He'd miscalculated, trying to take the whore on campus.

Aleks Levin was his new target. She'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time and picked a fight with the wrong fucking person. She was the only one who'd seen him. His next whore would just have to wait.

He loaded his Glock and shoved it into the back of his nylon pants, then slipped on his motorcycle jacket and gloves and pulled the helmet over his head. No one would see his face. He grabbed a water bottle on the way out.

Two blocks south, he walked into a garage he'd rented to store his motorcycle. He yanked the cover from the Ducati, spilled a little water on the ground, and then swiped up some mud on the tips of his fingers. After smearing the mud over the license plate, he rinsed his glove with the water, took a swig, and threw the bottle into the garbage on his way out.

Seventy miles an hour felt too slow, but he couldn't risk getting pulled over. He took twisty residential back roads, the kind he lived for. He gunned the throttle, popped a wheelie, and hooted. Adrenaline shot through his system. Oh yeah, he needed more of that. He took a turn too sharp, missed the oncoming car by inches.

Whew! That was close.

He parked in the alley behind Aleks's apartment and took the stairs two at a time. He knocked on the door.

No response.

He knocked again.

Still no response.

He grabbed a kit out of his back pocket and picked the lock. A quick glance behind him confirmed no one was watching. He pulled his gun and stepped into

the apartment.

Everything was quiet.

He walked around the living room, slowly soaking in the details. He prided himself on his tracking abilities. Every small detail helped with the hunt. He reviewed each picture on the fridge, read through every birthday card on the counter. “Won’t make it to twenty-one, Aleks.”

The bedroom was a mess, clothes strewn all over the floor. Several bills were piled on the dresser, along with Aleks’s fall schedule. He opened it and memorized each class, room number, and teacher. He never wrote anything down. No evidence could ever be left behind. His father had taught him that.

The creak of the front door meant someone was coming in.

He jumped behind the wall, another adrenaline rush fueling him.

Soft footsteps signaled it was a woman. If he was lucky, it would be Aleks.

His fingers twitched as he waited for her to come to him, the Glock hard against his hand.

Another door opened... then the sound of a shower.

He peered around the corner.

Steam flowed out of the three-inch crack of the bathroom door. Aleks’s roommate was undressing. Her perky breasts swayed up and down as she tied her hair into a knot. His eyes roamed down her flat stomach to the black patch of hair between her legs. She turned and flashed him her exquisite ass.

There were two kinds of power he craved. One was the power over a woman when she begged him to satisfy her. The other was the power over a whore when she took her last dying breath.

He slowly walked to the bathroom, reached for the door, and twisted the handle.



“MEET ME AT ALEKS’S APARTMENT.” Neal was speaking to Riley on his cell phone. “She’s refusing a safe house for now. Let’s get her stuff, and then we’ll talk some sense into her.”

“Copy that.”

Aleks was sitting in the front seat of Neal’s black Maxima. She rolled her eyes at his comment while her fingers constantly drummed on her legs. It had to be rough on her.

“Can we listen to music?” She didn’t wait for an answer, just turned on the radio and started jumping through the channels. “This is a good one.” She stopped on “Radioactive” by Imagine Dragons and started singing along, the inflection in her voice mimicking that on the radio.

“You’re a good singer.” Neal took a left and parked in front of her apartment.

“I love karaoke.” Aleks opened the car door.

Neal grabbed her arm and pulled her back in. “We wait for backup.”

“Can’t you protect me?”

“I’m not on the case.”

“What? Why?” The color in her cheeks disappeared.

“Because you and I... it’s against regulation to be on a case if there’s a personal connection to a victim or material witness.”

“But—” Her eyes grew damp and overly bright.

“I’m not going anywhere. But we’re going to follow the rules, or I lose my badge. I’m here with you as long as you want me to be. Personally, not professionally.”

“Can you protect me, personally?”

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

It took a moment for that to register with her. Then the lines on her forehead relaxed and she returned to fiddling with the radio every time she didn’t care for the song.

Neal liked her choices, even though she kept switching between his rock station and pop and country. After ten minutes, a car pulled up behind them. Neal glanced in his rearview mirror. “Riley’s here. Let’s go.”

Neal led, with Aleks behind him and Riley in the rear. They walked up the stairs slowly. “Unlock the door, but don’t open it,” Neal said to Aleks.

She unlocked the door and stepped back when Riley motioned her to the side.

Neal counted to three on his fingers.

Riley opened the door.

Neal went in with his gun ready.

A scream erupted from a woman who jumped up from the couch.

“Sierra.” Aleks ran in behind Riley. “It’s okay, they’re with me.”

“Holy crap.” Aleks’s roommate placed both hands over her heart and sank onto the couch. “I was taking a shower, and I swore I heard someone in the apartment. The bathroom door was closed when I got out, and I’m sure I left it open to vent the room since the fan is broken.”

Aleks nodded.

“I got dressed and came out here, and then you,” she said, pointing to Neal and Riley, “come walking in with guns.”

Neal turned to Riley, and they both pulled up their guns at the same time. Someone had been in the apartment—and still could be.

Sierra broke the silence, her eyes tracking their motions. “What the—”

Riley put his finger to his lips to signal Sierra to be quiet.

Neal’s heart rate spiked. He held up his hand to let Aleks know to stay put and headed to the small kitchen.

Riley shifted on his feet and pointed the gun between the refrigerator and the island. He signaled all clear.

Neal kept his sight focused down the barrel of his gun. He checked the bathroom. Empty.

Riley came in behind him.

Neal motioned to his right, then swung into the bedroom to the left.

No one was in the room.

He shifted his eyes toward the closet.

Riley nodded and slid it open with his foot.

Neal was ready.

All clear.

Neal slowed his breathing and holstered his gun. Damn. They could have had him, if they’d been just a little earlier. “He knows it’s Aleks.”

“We need to get her out of here.” Riley turned as Aleks walked into the room.

"How could he know who I am? This just happened last night," Aleks said.

"Is anything missing, anything out of place?" Neal wasn't exactly sure how she'd be able to tell with all the clothes strewn across the floor.

She glanced around the room. "No, everything is—wait." She walked to her dresser. "I think my class schedule has been moved."

Neal motioned to the printout and looked at Riley. "He's been here. It's someone she knows or..."

"Someone at the hospital," Riley finished.

"I was thinking someone in the precinct." Neal picked up a backpack and handed it to Aleks. "Pack your bags. You're not coming back here for a while. Only touch what you're going to take. I doubt we'll find prints, but they'll dust for them."

Riley stepped out to the hallway and waited for Neal to follow. "Only a handful of people at the hospital know about Aleks, and maybe a dozen at the precinct. Both Aleks and the vic are in danger. It's his worst nightmare, a witness and a survivor. He'll come after them both. We followed protocol; it didn't leak. The attack hasn't even been reported on the news."

Neal stopped by the bathroom door. "It might be someone who knows Aleks. Maybe he goes to U-Dub. Both vics were found on or near campus."

"She doesn't exactly blend in." Riley glanced at Aleks's hair. "He could have been in one of her classes, or someone who lives near here. We need to get her into police protection."

Aleks walked into the bathroom and started throwing things into her bag. "No way, I'm not doing it. That bastard is not going to take over my life. I'm going to school on Monday, and there's nothing either of you can do to stop me."

Riley opened his mouth to counter. Her glare stopped him, and he turned to Neal. "So, where were you taking her?" Typical Riley. A complete wuss when confronted with an angry woman.

"I was going to take Aleks to her parents' place. But we can't go there if he knows who she is. It would put her family in danger as well."

"I'm *right* here. Don't talk about me like I'm not." Aleks stomped into the living area.

Sierra rose from the couch. "What's going on, Aleks?"

"I, uh, can't say. But neither one of us can stay here right now. It's not safe."

Riley stepped forward. "Sierra shouldn't be in danger; if he wanted to hurt her, he would have already. But she shouldn't stay here."

Aleks gave Riley a look that said "Couldn't you have said that any nicer?" She turned to Sierra. "Why don't you pack a bag and go stay with Brooke. I'll go—oh hell, where will I go? Jade and Bryce are getting married next month, and I am so not going to rain on that parade."

Neal placed a hand on Aleks's shoulder. "You'll stay at my place until we figure this out."

Both Riley and Aleks looked at him at the same time.

He lifted his hands, palms out. "Do either of you have a better plan?"

"No, I'm in." Aleks agreed all too quickly. She handed him one of her bags.

Riley pulled Neal aside. "Not a good idea, man. Cap won't allow it."

"It's the perfect idea. If she won't go into police protection, then I can keep an

eye on her. I'm useless as hell riding a desk. I'll take the leave Cap keeps bugging me about, and I'll be with her twenty-four-seven. Where she goes, I go, and I'll keep you informed."

"Still won't fly. You have a personal relationship with her."

Neal stared at Riley. He was right. But there was one way around the regulations. "Then it's a good thing I'm officially her boyfriend. Cap can't do anything about that." Though what Kenzie would do—that was another matter. He'd just have to deal with that later. Keeping Aleks safe and catching the killer were the priorities.

Riley shook his head. "You're serious, Hawk?"

"Dead serious."

"I'll talk to Cap, but her whereabouts need to stay on a damn tight leash. If it's someone on the inside, we can't be too careful. This asshole has killed two women, and he almost got a third last night. Aleks is our best hope of finding him."

Aleks was watching the two of them like a cat tracking a mouse. She hadn't said anything, but the gleam in her eyes told Neal that wouldn't last.

Was he making the mistake to end all mistakes?

Too late now.

Aleks hefted her backpack over her shoulder. "Let's go, boyfriend." She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the door. "I can't stay here another minute. This place gives me the creeps."

Neal stopped at the threshold. "Hand me your phone first."

"What for?" Aleks reluctantly gave it to him and frowned when he turned it off and pulled the battery out.

"If it's someone on the inside, this can be tracked. No more cell phones for you until we find this guy. You can use the phone at my house for emergencies only. No one can know where you're staying."

"Sheesh, a bit strict aren't you?" She turned to Riley. "Can you make sure Sierra gets out of here... nicely?"

Riley lifted his hands and his shoulders in a what-did-I-do gesture. "Sure." To Neal he said, "Go. I'll call you later."

Neal poked his head out the front door, checking the front and side for any sign of someone watching. A man on a black Ducati made a left at the stop sign, and a silver Toyota Corolla pulled away from the curb. He checked in the window as the car went by. It was an older female, midfifties, with two kids in the backseat. Probably grandchildren.

When the coast was clear, he walked Aleks to the car. "For this to work," he said and threw her bags in the trunk, "you and I are joined at the hip. You go to school, I go with you. You go to the store, I'm right by your side."

"Sounds stifling," Aleks said as she got in the car.

"Yes... it does." He started the ignition.

So why was she smiling?



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jodi Ashland is an award-winning author of romantic suspense. If you enjoy reading about empowered women who overcome adversity, flawed sexy heroes who love them, and action packed mystery and suspense, then you'll love Jodi Ashland's books. Jodi has a B.S. in Information Systems and an M.B.A. but has pursued her true passion writing novels and poems. She is a mother of two, cancer survivor, kayaker, skier, gardener, camper, and lover of all things outdoors.

Visit Jodi Ashland at www.jodiashland.com or on any of her social media sites where she looks forward to meeting you.