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By Rochelle Alers

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But while trying to stay busy and ignore the magnetic pull of the hunky lawman, Simone discovers that sharing her home with a bodyguard stirs up a storm of longing. Soon, their closeness becomes electrifying, as friendship brings intimacy and an endless night of uncontrollable passion. But will the morning after bring regrets...or promises of forever?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Hailed by readers and booksellers alike as one of today's most popular African-American authors of women's fiction, Ms. Alers is a regular on bestsellers list, and has been a recipient of numerous awards, including the Vivian Stephens Award for Excellence in Romance Writing and a Zora Neale Hurston Literary Award. Visit her Web site www.rochellealers.com

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Simone Whitfield got up at the same time every day regardless of the season. This morning, rather than prepare to work in the greenhouses on her property, she readied herself to go to a nearby park. She'd waited months for spring and the return of warmer weather to resume jogging.

Staring at her reflection in the mirror over the bathroom vanity, she pulled a large-tooth comb through her hair, securing it off her face in an elastic band. It'd been years since she'd worn her hair off her shoulders, but had been reluctant to cut it because her ex-husband said he liked long hair. Their on-again, off-again relationship from high school sweethearts, to marriage, divorce and a failed reconciliation spanned sixteen years, and Anthony Kendrick no longer had a place in her life.

Now at thirty-three, she'd moved on and had no intention of ever looking back. She'd given Tony more chances than he deserved to get his act together and his last plea of *just one more time* had fallen on deaf ears. Besides, she had other things on which to concentrate. She was involved in running her own floral business, Wildflowers and Other Treasures, while planning her sister's wedding that was only seven weeks away.

Simone couldn't believe her very staid younger sister was planning to marry. Tessa Whitfield, the preeminent wedding planner for Signature Bridals and Event Planners, Inc., and who'd coordinated countless weddings, was now going to be a Signature bride.

A week before Simone had been maid of honor for her cousin Faith Whitfield-McMillan, who'd just returned from honeymooning with her husband, Ethan. Beautiful, elegant Faith had eloped over the Valentine's Day weekend after a two-month whirlwind courtship; then two and a half months later, she and Ethan repeated their vows for friends and family members in a church ceremony.

Faith had invited her, Tessa and Micah Sanborn, Tessa's fiancé, to her Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey home for dinner Saturday evening, and she looked forward to sharing the small, intimate gathering with family members.

Flicking off the bathroom light, she walked into the adjoining bedroom and scooped up a set of keys and a

cell phone off the dresser. Simone left her bedroom and took the staircase downstairs to an area of the large farmhouse where she'd set up a laundry room and work-shop/mudroom. Sitting on a wooden bench, she slipped her sock-covered feet into a pair of running shoes. At the last minute, she decided to take a small canister of pepper spray. Coyote sightings in several Westchester County communities had prompted her to purchase the spray, which she prayed she'd never have to use. Putting on a hooded sweatshirt, she pushed the spray, cell phone and keys into the deep pockets. Depressing a button on the keypad on a wall, she activated the property's security system and stepped out into the warm, spring morning.

The panoramic view from the two-story house with a wraparound porch that overlooked the Hudson River was why Simone had decided to purchase the foreclosed, three-acre dilapidated property for a fraction of its worth. It'd taken more than seven years and an incalculable amount of money for her to restore the century-old house and surrounding landscape to its original beauty.

She set off down the hill at a brisk walk toward a wooded area that led into a park with a track, tennis and basketball courts and a baseball diamond. A layer of moisture had dotted her body under the sweatpants and hoodie as she increased her pace along the narrow, paved path.

The sound of footsteps behind her prompted Simone to glance over her shoulder. She recognized the tall, slender man with salt-and-pepper hair. "Good morning, Judge Fischer."

"Good morning, Simone," he said, breathing heavily as he joined her, their rubber-soled feet keeping pace.

The greeting was barely out of his mouth when a large form sprang from a copse of trees. Within seconds, Mitchell Fischer's throat was caught in a savage grip.

Early morning sunlight glinted off a shiny object as it came down once, then again.

Simone couldn't move or scream; she stood stunned as she watched the horrific scene. Fear held her in a stranglehold until the limp body of her neighbor crumpled to the ground and his assailant turned toward her. Reacting on instinct, she reached into her pocket and took out the pepper spray. Her gaze locked on a pair of glittering gold eyes before she noticed the large tattoo on the back of his right hand. The blade of the knife he'd used to stab Judge Fischer was covered with blood. Pressing the red button on the canister of pepper spray, she aimed it directly at the man's face. There came a high-pitched scream followed by a gurgling sound. The knife fell to the ground as he stumbled around blindly before falling into the underbrush.

Everything that followed appeared to happen in slow motion for Simone. She remembered taking off her sweatshirt and pressing it to her neighbor's chest at the same time she fumbled in her pocket for her cell.

Don't panic! Get it together, she told herself over and over. "Judge Fischer." The wounded man's eyelids fluttered, then closed. She applied more pressure, dropping her phone and using both hands while attempting to stem the spreading red stain across the jacket of his white tracksuit.

"What happened?"

She glanced up to see two joggers standing over her. "Someone stabbed Judge Mitchell Fischer. Please call 911 and let them know whoever attacked him ran off into the woods."

One of the joggers took out his own cell phone and gave the 911 operator their location while the other took over for Simone, administering first aid. Within minutes, the wail of sirens, the distinctive whir of the blades

of a helicopter and the cacophony of voices disturbed the quiet of the morning as curious spectators crowded around the crime scene, shocked and appalled that someone had attempted to murder one of their most respected residents.

U.S. Deputy Marshal Raphael Madison maneuvered the government-registered SUV into the driveway of the address he'd programmed into the vehicle's GPS. He'd left his Poughkeepsie condo within minutes of receiving an "urgent" call from his supervisor. Racing against time, he took a taxi to the Dutchess County Airport. Passengers on the small commuter plane glared at him, after the announcement that the carrier was being delayed pending his arrival. It seemed as if the plane had just taken off before it touched down at the Westchester County, where he'd been briefed on Judge Fischer's attack and eyewitness Simone Whitfield and picked up the vehicle.

Opening the hatch, Rafe got out and retrieved two carry-ons and a garment bag. Shifting slightly, his gaze swept over the surrounding landscape. Simone Whitfield's house was built on a hill with breathtaking views of the Hudson River, Westchester County and northern New Jersey.

His last three assignments had been in hotels with adjoining suites where he'd ordered room service and spent countless hours watching television with witnesses he was assigned to protect. Closing the SUV hatch, he climbed the porch steps and rang the doorbell. A stake on the front lawn and decals on several windows verified that the property was monitored by a security company.

The door opened and he came face-to-face with someone from his past. "Well, I'll be damned."

U.S. Deputy Marshal Keven Robbins flashed a wide grin. "Rafe Madison! How the hell are you?" He and Raphael Madison had joined the Marshals Service at the same time.

Dropping his luggage, Rafe shook the other man's hand, while slapping his back. "I thought you were with Prisoner Services." Marshals assigned to Prisoner Services assumed custody of those who were arrested by all federal agencies and were responsible for the housing and transportation of prisoners from the time they were brought into custody until they were either acquitted or imprisoned.

"I was, but transferred over to OCS three months ago. Court security is very different from babysitting prisoners."

"But not much different from babysitting witnesses. Speaking of witnesses, where's Miss Whitfield?"

"Come on in. She's upstairs."

"Please let her know that I'm here."

Rafe retrieved his bags while Keven climbed the

stairs to the second floor. Walking into the spacious entryway, Rafe set his luggage down under a table with a vase filled with a profusion of white and pink flowers that resembled roses. The table was crowded with white candles of different sizes. The seat of a delicate-looking straight-back chair in a corner was covered with a cushion in red and white striped ticking. He preferred more contemporary furnishings, but had to admit that the space was charming *and* inviting.

Seeing movement out of the corner of his eye, Rafe turned, all of his senses on full alert, and stared at the

woman whom he'd been assigned to protect until the conclusion of the trial of Ian Benton. Judge Mitchell Fischer's attacker had been captured a short distance from the crime scene by a SWAT team after search dogs found him hiding in a copse of trees. Temporarily blinded by pepper spray, he'd been unable to make it back to where he'd parked his car, which had been reported stolen two days before.

During Rafe's briefing, he'd learned that Simone Ina Whitfield was in her early thirties, but the petite woman with a dusky gold-brown complexion, large, haunting, hazel eyes and a mop of damp, loose, reddish curls appeared closer to twenty-three than thirty-three.

He forced himself not to stare at her full, lush mouth. There was something about her mouth that reminded him of sultry vixen. A pair of loose-fitting sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt made her appear small and fragile.

Rafe strolled across the room and extended his hand. "I'm Deputy Marshal Rafe Madison."

Simone stared at the large, well-groomed hand as if it were a venomous reptile. "May I please see some ID?"

"I can assure you that he is who he..." Keven Robbins's voice trailed off when Simone shot him a warning look.

"I was told by the U.S. attorney at the courthouse that I wasn't to trust anyone or assume they're who they say they are," she said quietly, glaring at the seemingly embarrassed federal officer. Her gaze swung back to the man who'd been assigned to live in her home while monitoring her whereabouts 24/7. Forcing a smile, she held out her hand. "Now, may I see your identification, Marshal Madison?"

Dark eyebrows lifted slightly in Rafe's lightly tanned face as he reached into the back pocket of his jeans for a small leather case. He handed it to Simone, who stared at his picture ID and badge for several seconds, then returned it to him. A hint of a smile tilted the corners of his mouth. "Are you convinced now?"

There was something smug about Raphael Madison's attitude that irked Simone. Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I'll show you where you can put your things."

Keven cleared his throat. He wanted to tell Rafe that he would have his work cut out for him with Simone Whitfield. Although he'd found her very pretty, he detected a toughness in her that wasn't apparent at first glance. And she didn't scare easily. After all, she'd repelled Mitchell Fischer's attacker with pepper spray.

He winked at Rafe. "I'm going back to the courthouse." He nodded to Simone. "Miss Whitfield." Keven slapped Rafe's shoulder as he made his way to the front door. "Good luck, my friend," he said in a quiet voice. "She's a live one," he added sotto voce.

Rafe walked with Keven, closed and locked the door, then picked up his luggage. When he returned to the living room, he realized Simone hadn't moved. When his gaze met hers, he saw uncertainty in the brown-green orbs. Was she in shock? Had the enormity that she could've been murdered or seriously wounded finally set in?

But she hadn't been killed or injured because common sense and quick thinking had saved not only her life, but also that of a federal judge.

Simone blinked once, as if coming out of a trance. "Follow me, Mr. Madison."

Rafe stared at her back as she headed for the staircase. "We have to settle something straightaway, Simone." She stopped her retreat and turned to face him. "Since I'm going to be living with you for a while, I believe we can dispense with the formality of Mr. Madison and Miss Whitfield."

Her naturally arching eyebrows flickered. "How do we address each other?"

"Rafe and Simone will do. It'd be better for everyone involved if you don't advertise why I'm here."

If Simone hadn't been so traumatized by the day's events, she would've reacted to the tall man with a mane of dirty-blond hair and intense dark-blue eyes. He'd been blessed with the most exquisite bone structure she'd ever seen in a man. His perfectly symmetrical features made him almost a little too pretty. He was what her pastry chef cousin, Faith, would refer to as *delicious* or *yummy*. A lightweight black jacket was stretched over his broad shoulders and a pair of well-washed jeans hugged his lower toned body like a second skin. It didn't matter if he was easy on the eyes; she'd never been attracted to blond men.

"How do I explain *you*, Rafe?" There was a hint of facetiousness in her query.

"You can say I'm an old friend from college."

"How do you know that I attended college?"

Rafe's impassive expression didn't change. "I know everything—well, almost everything—about you," he said, correcting himself.

Users Review

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Elena Sparrow:

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