

Perilous Attraction
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Dedication:

To Jules Egan and Susan Tatley, for their extraordinary critiques and friendship.

Someone hides in the shadows...

Anna Wilde needs protection from a sinister figure that watches her every move. When the man she trusts least of all vows to keep her safe, she must decide whether ex-marine turned security specialist Shane Corelli can do the job and if she can deny her out-of-this-world attraction for him.

Tempers flare...

Shane regrets the promises he broke years ago, and remembers the supercharged desire he's always felt for her.

Heat ravages the city...

When a power outage traps them in an elevator, they'll resurrect hot, perilous attraction and relearn a trust broken long ago.

Anna Wilde abruptly stopped within sight of her car.

She could see the headlines now.

Stalker claims fourth victim in drive by shooting.

Superheated air in the basement level parking garage blew furnace hot in her face. She took a closer look at the sinister, dark blue low rider sedan parked next to her red compact Ford.

That car again. It can't be a coincidence.

Are you sure?

She couldn't ignore the hair rising on her neck, or the cold shiver that persisted in spite of the horrendous heat wave that blanketed Denver. A drop of sweat trickled down her neck.

Maybe the high June temperatures influenced her as it did so many other people. An upsurge in the crime rate worried officials, and the news media chattered about the heat as if it were a disease and could somehow be cured. A series of electrical outages in the last few days didn't help matters, but the power companies promised they'd get a grip on the situation. Right now, alone in the parking garage, she didn't feel like she had any grasp on her personal situation.

All the serial killer's victims, one a week over a four week period, had been slaughtered by a gunshot in a lonely parking garage.

Instinct told her to take heed. Better to be cautious rather than sorry.

She'd seen the low rider sedan around her neighborhood and parked in this garage far too often for her liking. The car even followed her down the street a few times. That alone wouldn't have made her wary, except for the dark figure inside the car seemed to lurk in corners. She could never quite see the face of the person behind those tinted windows.

Pay attention, Anna.

Sometimes the cautionary voice in her head sounded like her mother. She didn't know whether to be grateful or annoyed at the persistent urgings of that inner voice.

Silence seemed to have a voice of its own in the huge, echoing area. Somewhere a car door slammed, but it sounded far away.

A headache formed at her temples. A cool shower, an aspirin, and maybe a cup of tea would wipe away her confusion and the rotten day she'd had at the public relations firm of Baker and Tweed. She quickly discovered a month ago that her new executive administrative assistant position paid lip service to the *executive* part of her job description. Try glorified gofer.

Top off the day with the awareness that Shane Corelli had stood her up once again.

Five times must be a record. The first time had been at her senior prom in high school before he entered the military. The second, right after spending some significant face time with him one summer. The third time he hadn't acquired leave to see her after her parents had been killed. The fourth time he'd danced with her five minutes at a Christmas party last year when his pager went off and he said duty called and left. Taggart Security Team's Assignment Assistant, Tammy Carter-Hawthorne, promised Shane would be here two hours ago. Anna had needed him more than ever, and he hadn't appeared. This situation proved once and for all that she couldn't rely on Shane. She wouldn't allow it to happen again.

Never could rely on a man to do anything.

Now *that* was her mother talking.

Determined not to care about Corelli's duplicity, she continued toward her car. Halfway there she got the creepy impression someone watched her from close by. She glanced at the low-rider and realized the dark figure sat within, unmoving and staring in her direction. Her fingers tightened on her keys.

Anna headed back into the elevator foyer and punched the key to go up. Fear danced over her skin as she waited for the elevator to reach her. She'd retreat to her office and call Taggart

Security Team's hotline. Although the security specialists company was housed in the same building, the office was closed for the night. Maybe they could send over another bodyguard.

Or you could call the police.

They would probably say she overreacted, because she didn't have any proof the person in the low rider meant to stalk her. Yes, she'd received a series of threatening phone calls promising that she would be killed brutally, but nothing concrete beyond that. Phone calls alone didn't mean squat.

She supposed she could also ask a security guard in the building to escort her to her car.

Exasperated with her lack of forethought, she rubbed her forehead and heaved a sigh. Then again, the security guard couldn't follow her home. Her vulnerability irked her as did the realization she needed help.

She hated that.

She slid her fingers through her short hair, glad she didn't have long tresses that would stifle her in this heat. Her headache increased, and she took deep breaths to try and soothe her nerves.

The elevator opened and she stepped inside, punching the button that would take her to her ninth floor office. At least she could lock herself in there until help arrived. Three floors up the elevator made a clunking noise, and the florescent lights flickered. A surprised gasp left her throat. Lights blazed bright within a second or two, and she released a breath as the car continued its upward journey.

Once she left the elevator, she slipped inside the modern public relations offices and locked the door. She tossed her handbag on the couch and reached for the phone, when she heard muffled sounds coming down the hallway. Seconds later, a hard knock landed on the door. Anna's heart leapt and tried to break out of her chest.

Startled into immobility, she waited.

"Anna? Anna, are you in there?"

Surprised to hear her name called through the thick doorway, she thought the voice sounded familiar. On impulse, she reached in her purse and snatched her keys. She'd keep them at the ready to use as a weapon. She strode toward the door, putting confidence into her stride.

She reached for the doorknob. "Who is it?"

"Shane."

Although paranoia didn't come naturally to her, she decided to play it safe. She peeped around the side of the door through the huge glass windows. When she saw Shane, tremendous relief made her knees weaken.

Renewed anger made her jerk the door open and glare. "It's too late, Shane Corelli. You're fired."

"No," he said with grim determination as he stepped into the office. "I'm not."

Anna assessed the man in front of her. The last time she'd seen him, at her brother's Christmas party last year, he'd been on leave, and his usual kick-butt-and-take-names personality seemed on vacation, too. She remembered her hot, unbelievably intense need when he'd asked her to dance. He'd treated her like she was the only woman in the world. For a few exquisite moments, she'd believed his sultry, smoldering looks and hot touches. He'd held her close and explained that he expected to be shipped out within the week to Afghanistan. Worry for his safety made her hold him tightly and sink into his gentle, melting brown eyes.

Right now, though, he looked pissed.

Shane's take-no-prisoners expression and stance said all bets were off. He meant business and wouldn't stand for anyone blocking the way.

The Shane she'd known in high school possessed the lean build of a runner. His casual dark blue sports jacket, burgundy silk shirt, charcoal gray pants, and black wing-tip shoes couldn't hide his physical condition. Whatever he'd been doing all these years in the marines had bulked up his muscles and given him the ripped, high-powered physique of a lethal machine. Thirty-eight years of living gave him a commanding presence few people would dispute. He shifted and she saw a shoulder holster and weapon.

Hard, dark as coal eyes challenged, and his implacable features showed clear impatience. No one would accuse Shane of being a pretty boy with his rough-hewn features. His thick, dark brown hair curled against his head in luscious waves, no longer the short cut required for the military. She could see the gold flicks in his deep, mahogany eyes. Life in the marines had given Shane new lines, and his once almost boyish features seemed more cut and clipped. A large nose kept his face rugged and commanding. Only a teasing, wicked smile could transform his face.

But, oh, she remembered that smile too often late at night. Unguarded in sleep, erotic dreams about Shane holding her, kissing her, making love to her would slip past her defenses. More than a dozen times in the last few years, she'd awakened with his name on her lips.

A much familiar lightening bolt attraction sliced through her, making her stomach clench and her heart resume a fast beat. With difficulty she reined back her instant reaction, and recalled that this man couldn't be trusted. So what if she'd developed an intense lust for him that she couldn't shake?

Shane's lips tightened, and that's when she saw pain flash through his face. A gauze pad graced his right temple, and fresh blood soaked through. Concern sliced her.

Before she could ask him about his injury, Shane stepped forward. Out of surprise, she moved back into the office, and he closed the door behind him.

Then she noticed his sports jacket had a small tear on the right shoulder and dirt smudged his pants legs. Surprise made her ask, "What on earth happened to you?"

"I had a problem I had to take care of." His hands went to her shoulders, cupping them in a purposeful but gentle grip. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, no thanks to you." Her sharp words slipped out before she could corral them. "Tammy said you'd be here two hours ago. I know she's reliable. Therefore, the lapse must be yours."

Shane's eyes turned glacial, the concern wiped clean and replaced with a rigid military bearing. He didn't release her, and his fingers sent swift tingles of awareness through her midsection.

"Still haven't forgiven me for Christmas?" he asked, a husky, soft quality to his voice.

"You've got a record for not being around when you're needed."

As soon as she spoke, she winced. She didn't often show her spleen, but something about this man made her emotions roil. When she realized that she continued to grip her keys like a weapon, she slipped them into her pants pocket.

His big, callused hands swept from her shoulders down to her wrists in a soothing caress. When his fingers clasped hers, an excited tingle zigzagged through her body.

"You've changed, Anna. I don't remember you being this unhappy."

"Unhappy? Don't turn your unreliability into my problem—"

“Stop.” His eyes snapped with anger. “Stop a minute and listen. Tammy *did* call me. I was on assignment when my client was attacked. I brought down the culprit, but he was a bit bigger than me. He managed to get in a few good punches before I took him down.” A rueful smile touched his lips, more sarcasm than amusement. “I tried calling your office and got the machine, then tried your cell phone to let you know what happened, and that I was on my way.”

Her cell phone. She’d forgotten to turn it on again. “I’m...I’m sorry. I’ve got this problem with remembering to turn on the phone when I leave the office.”

He squeezed her hands gently and released them. “Anna, whatever you think of me, you know I’d never let you down if I thought you were in danger.”

Could Tammy have set this up? Tammy didn’t know about her rocky relationship with Shane. Or did she? “I’d heard rumors you’d returned to Denver.”

“I’ve been with the Team about a month.”

“Tammy said you retired from the marines less than two months ago.”

He nodded. “I started hunting down job options and decided my home state was where I wanted to be.” His gaze turned intense and warm upon her. “I wanted to be closer to my family and friends.”

“Retired?” she asked. “Has it been that many years?”

“Twenty, to be exact.” He reached down for her purse and handed it to her. His gaze turned speculative. “Have you been waiting for me all this time?”

In a weird way she wondered if she *had* waited years for him, but she knew he didn’t mean that. She’d dated off and on over the years. More often than not, she’d found herself wishing those men were Shane.

“I gave up about twenty minutes ago and went down to the parking garage,” she said.

He frowned. “You did what?”

“I wasn’t going to wait around for you to *maybe* show up.”

His features tensed into an immobile mask, professional and cool. “You know better than to step into a dangerous situation without a backup.”

“I did a recon, as you would say.”

He shifted away from her and looked out of the huge windows that showed diamond point lights of the city. “You have to be more careful.”

She smoothed a hand through her hair again, feeling hot and uncomfortable. “No lectures, please. I realized it wasn’t a good thing to do as soon as I saw the low rider.”

Silenced covered the room as he seemed to evaluate the situation. “Tell me, from beginning to end, what’s been happening the last few weeks. How many phone calls have you received?”

“Twelve over a week and a half.”

His expression turned incredulous. “My God, Anna.”

She put up one hand. “I didn’t know until I read in the paper yesterday that this serial killer calls the women he’s stalking.”

“What else makes you think someone is after you?”

“I only know what I feel. My instincts tell me he’s out there watching me. If you don’t believe me, I can ask Tammy to assign someone else to my case.”

He shook his head. “No, I believe you.”

Relieved, she sighed. “Thanks. I didn’t say anything to my co-workers. They aren’t exactly the types that believe instincts are to be followed.”

“Cynical types?”

She rubbed the back of her neck, and her hair felt damp. “Let’s just say they aren’t warm and fuzzy. I don’t trust them yet.”

Don’t trust anyone, Anna. Isn’t that what her mother had always taught her?

He nodded with grave conviction. “You were right to call for help, but you should have done it sooner.”

Tired of his bossy tone, she stepped forward and poked her index finger in the middle of his broad, muscular chest. “I’m not an imbecile or a child, Shane. Imperious behavior will get you no where.”

A teasing grin covered his mouth, adding sparkle to his eyes. “What would get me somewhere?”

The innuendo made her heart beat faster. Could he say or do anything that would erase this odd combination of arousal and exasperation? “I don’t know.”

“Stop poking me, or there will be hell to pay.” Soft and dangerous, his tone said he meant business.

Challenged, she left her hand on his chest. “What are you going to do, Shane?”

He caught her hand and held it against his chest, and his heartbeat under her fingers started an answering pulse in her body. “You know I’d never hurt you, but there are other things I could do.”

As she stared into his deep eyes, Anna knew he could drive her to within an inch of screaming. Emotions boiled inside her. Disappointment and irritation topped the list, with a heady arousal coming in a close second. Did he realize how his simple touch made her skin tingle and hum?

Then she saw his gaze take on a different nuance; the warm, attentive look he’d given her while dancing at the Christmas party. He leaned in slightly, and her lips parted.

She held her breath, not knowing what to expect.

An answering, full-boil hunger in his eyes surprised her. Desire spilled into Anna, a warm chocolate that tempted with messages of sinful delights yet undiscovered. When he did nothing but stare at her with that knee-buckling heated look, she almost ran away from him.

Anna knew he’d never harm her physically, but emotionally she couldn’t rely on him. She stared at their hands; his big, masculine fingers looked strong and capable, while her hand seemed tiny and pale in comparison. She didn’t feel weak under his touch, but a strange, compelling elation that dared her to risk everything for this unrelenting attraction. Her skin tingled as he continued to pinion her hand against the hard wall of his chest.

She dragged her gaze away so she wouldn’t feel his breath-stealing scrutiny. One thing she could count on when around Shane; he always made her feel out of control and trembling on the edge of discovery. Ascertaining her feelings was difficult when the man didn’t give her an inch breathing room.

Did he know that the deep, vibrating sound of his voice sounded sexy and caring? She didn’t believe he felt anything more than professional worry. All of a sudden Anna felt ridiculous for allowing hormones to overwhelm her.

“Anna?”

Snapping back to reality, she withdrew her hand from under his and moved to a less scary train of thought. “Tammy said you’ll follow me to and from work each day.”

His eyes grew wary, as if he sensed her hesitation. “I’ll do more than that, and you know it.”

“Twenty-four, seven?”

“I’ll be with you day and night.” Warm and raw, his voice dipped low with sensual nuance. “Until we know you’re safe.”

A fresh wave of heat rolled through her. *Until we know I’m safe and then what?* Would he disappear from her life again?

She heaved her handbag over her shoulder and started toward the door. “Maybe this was a mistake. I can cut you loose from this assignment—”

“No.” He jammed his fingers through his hair and heaved a breath. “I realize you hate my guts, but let’s try to get along, all right?”

Hate his guts? She wished she could hate him, because it would make this encounter easier.

Shane put his hands on his hips. “The guy that’s stalking you may not be the same man that killed those other women. I’m not willing to take that chance with your life. Until we find out otherwise, I’m going to be with you, watching your back every step of the way.”

Anna shook her head. “I can’t believe any of this is real.”

“Believe it. The creep who killed those women is a predator. Don’t ever devalue your instincts, Anna. They might save your life.”

His confidence in her, even when she’d been rude to him, made her appreciate Shane in a whole new way. “I’m sorry I was abrupt earlier. It’s been the day from hell.”

Shane’s gaze held promises. “You’ll have plenty of time to make it up to me.”

He brushed his finger under her chin in a gesture he’d used with her dozens of times. Sweet warmth played and danced over her skin and filled her senses with a profound awareness of Shane’s ability to show kindness.

Having Shane glued to her side day and night would make her nervous. For so many years she’d been annoyed with him, and now his presence frightened and thrilled her in a whole new way.

She made a scoffing sound. “Cheeky as always, I see.”

“Would you have me any other way?”

Have him. A vivid image of Shane naked and willing popped into her mind with startling clarity. Her face heated.

She cleared her throat. “Then you wouldn’t be the Shane I know and—” She about strangled as she cut off her last word.

“Yeah?” His voice dropped, encouraging with a gentle nudging she couldn’t ignore.

Instead of the expected teasing twinkle in his eyes, she saw a dead serious question.

Surely he didn't think...he couldn't imagine that she cared for him *that* way. That her feelings went deeper than mere attraction?

Conflicting emotions bounced through her. "Let's just forget it. It's been a long day, and I'm starving."

He clasped her upper arm in a gentle hold. "Let's discuss this over dinner."

Before she knew it, he propelled her out the door and down the hallway. As they waited for the elevator to arrive, she tried to ignore his closeness and the feeling of small against his superior height and strength.

Once cloistered inside the elevator, she took a glance at his profile. With a jolt she noticed a small bruise on his cheek she hadn't noticed before. A trickle of blood escaped the bandage on his forehead.

Fresh concern made her reach in her purse for tissues. She dabbed at the crimson liquid before it could mar his shirt. "You're bleeding again."

"Damn. Thought I'd taken care of that."

She looked into his deep-set eyes, knowing enough about concussions to look for symptoms. His pupils appeared okay, thank goodness. "Do you have a headache? You might have a concussion. Maybe you should see at doctor."

A smile tipped his lips and gave him the appearance of a cocky, wounded soldier. "No headache. And the paramedics declared me sound of body."

"Of mind, too?"

He chuckled. "No one can help me with that."

She smiled but continued to appraise his condition. With a man like Shane, it would take bullet wound to slow him down. Probably not even that. The man had the constitution of a pit bull.

The elevator dropped.

Anna gasped as the world fell away beneath her. Shane cursed as his arms went around her tightly. A jerk slung them against the wall as the elevator came to a slamming halt, and they tipped and fell to the floor. Lights ebbed, faded, then returned. Tortured metal groaned.

"Shane?" Anna lay under him, his weight pressing her down. His arms remained around her. "We...we didn't fall all the way."

Immediately he released her and levered up to his hands and knees. “No. We’d be dead.” His gaze snapped to hers. “Are you hurt?” When she didn’t speak, he cupped her face with one big, warm hand. “Anna, honey?”

“I’m fine. You?”

A thundercloud built in his face. “If that didn’t give me a concussion, nothing can.”

Anna sat up, and he helped her to her feet. “I think we dropped a couple of floors.”

His gaze tangled with hers and filled with understanding that they could have died if the brakes hadn’t stopped the elevator. He cupped her cheek again, then to her surprise, brushed a tender kiss over her nose. Just as quickly, he moved away.

After using the emergency phone and discovering it wouldn’t work, he turned to her. “Looks like we may be stuck here for some time.”

She leaned back against the wall. “I wonder if the recent power outages have anything to do with this.”

Shane groaned. “I didn’t think of that. We should have taken the stairs.” Frustration hardened his features. “Damn it.”

He grabbed his cell phone of his belt and called 911. His cell phone kept dropping the signal, and the operator couldn’t hear him well enough. Moments later, after he’d shouted information into the phone, the operator asked him to stay on the line. The line dropped again.

“Great,” Shane muttered. “Just great.”

He dialed the Taggart Security Team hot line and relayed a message on their location. When he cleared the call, he turned to Anna with a frown. “Power grid is down in this section of the city. I guess the police and fire department have their hands full. I think it’ll be awhile before anyone gets us out.”

Her headache decided to resurrect. She became aware of bumps and bruises she hadn’t felt a few minutes ago. When it came down to it she couldn’t complain; they were alive. Anna leaned against the elevator wall, deciding to make herself as comfortable as she could.

Shane looked at the woman he’d admired—hell, wanted—for what seemed a lifetime. Apprehension lingered in Anna’s green eyes, and she pushed strands of short, curly, honey brown hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ears. His gaze fixated on those small ears and he imagined kissing them and then nuzzling the long, white column of her neck. Her

conservative blue suit and white blouse couldn't hide luscious curves and endless legs. He wanted those legs wrapped around him.

Shane resisted the impulse to do something he'd regret later. Then again, their conversations always possessed a touch of supercharged air. Something about this woman made him reckless and willing to plunge into forbidden territory. Sexual frustration, wanting her in his arms, added to the over-the-edge conversation. When it came right down to it, he needed her with a driving power that made him hot and aching. When he'd held her hand against his chest, enjoying her touch, he thought he'd seen at least a flicker of excitement in her eyes. Anything was better than fear.

He didn't like seeing her frightened, but even more he hated the thought of a madman targeting her for his next victim. Fear and anger, plain and simple, surged through him when he received the call telling him Anna may be in danger.

Could he replace the distrust she felt with acceptance and friendship?

I could never be just friends with her.

No, the force of his desire required more.

Get over it, Corelli. If she knew how you felt, she'd run screaming in the other direction.

Never mind that his guilt ran deep. He couldn't turn back the clock and reverse what had happened between them—what *hadn't* happened. His mission in Afghanistan had made communication impossible for almost a month.

While out on assignment, he felt a soul deep disappointment. Out in the desert, eating sand and feeling the constant pressure of death and danger, he'd suffered through "what if" thoughts, aware that he'd waited too long to tell Anna how he felt about her.

What if the worst happened and he'd lost his only chance?

Hell, what did he have to lose? If he explained and she rejected him, he'd have to find a way to deal with the pain.

Her gaze flicked up to his. "What are you staring at?"

Unable to resist the slight pout he saw on her lips, he fixated on her bottom lower lip with undeniable interest. "You. It's been such a long time. I missed you."

Her mouth popped open in what looked like surprise. "I didn't think you would."

“After all the years we’ve known each other, I’m surprised you don’t realize that I care about you.” He leaned against the far wall across from her. “Are you going to trust me, or are we going to fight every step of the way?”

Cool eyes assessed him with skepticism. “Why should I trust you, Shane?”

“Clayton Ebery trusts me. Enough to insist that Taggert Security Team become his full time security force.”

Her eyes widened. “*The Clayton Ebery of Ebery Enterprises?* He’s one of the richest men in Denver.” She allowed her shoulder bag to slip to the floor, as if too tired to care. “What’s that have to do with you and me?”

“The man I tangled with today was a former employee of Ebery. Ebery was so impressed with my protection skills, he paid a bonus to Taggert Security Team.”

“Congratulations.” A dry, ironic tone filled out her voice. “I still don’t see what it has to do with trusting you.”

He put his hand over his heart. “I’m a professional. I’m good at what I do.”

She looked down, staring at the floor or her sensible black pumps. Her bow-shaped lips narrowed. “I never doubted your professionalism.” She met his eyes. “But I suppose unless I call Tammy and demand another bodyguard—”

“Don’t even think about it, honey.”

He moved away from the wall and advanced a couple of steps toward her. He caught a warm, floral scent he always associated with Anna. His body hummed with a need to hold her, but this time in passion. Did she have any idea how crazy she made him? Had always made him? Standing this close to her felt like sweet torture and pleasure all in one.

Silence gathered in the elevator like an entity all its own. Shane knew that if he wanted any chance with her, he needed to make amends. “Let’s clear the air. I don’t like secrets and insinuations.”

Surprised, Anna said nothing as she processed his blunt request. *Okay, he wants the whole enchilada, so be it.* She would give him reasons until she ran out of breath. “All right, let’s rewind to the beginning. Where it all started.”

“Agreed.”

She took a stabilizing breath before she could speak. “Before you went in the military, you and I were supposed to go to the prom and instead you stood me up for Catherine Aquino. I had a major crush on you and—”

She stopped, mortified that she’d allowed something much larger than a cat out of the bag. *Too much information, too soon, Anna.*

“You had a crush on me?” He sounded surprised and maybe a smidgen gratified. “Really?”

A boyish, almost playful grin transformed his mouth into a kissable, desirable mouth.

She licked her lips in response. “Why do you think I said yes when you asked me out?”

“Good question.”

She wondered if Shane remembered the times when Shane’s family had invited her and her brother over for parties. Mom had refused to let them go to Shane’s home. As time went by, Doug and Anna had discovered ways to slip out of the house and meet with Shane for parties, movies or conversation. Mom always maintained that a poor boy whose family lived in a mobile home park *couldn’t* be reliable. Mom hadn’t wanted her son to be friends with Shane, but when he came home on leave and Doug had his own place, Anna saw Shane occasionally.

When Shane didn’t speak, she continued. “When we met in high school in my junior year, I realized that you were different than the other boys. You were kind, funny, and had this sort of dark and dangerous thing going that I’d never encountered. Something...” She hesitated, then decided she would just say it. “Solid. Like you had all this energy inside you waiting to get out. I was attracted to it.” When his eyes warmed she didn’t know whether to be grateful he wasn’t teasing her about her teenage crush, or wishing that he would. She shrugged. “Then came the prom. I was eighteen. Kids are so intense at that age. When I saw you kissing Catherine in the hallway the day before prom...that was pretty devastating.”

Remorse saddened his gaze. “I was full of piss and vinegar. Catherine was beautiful and she laughed at my jokes. I ran to Catherine instead of facing my feelings for you.”

Her mouth fell open. Finally she recovered her voice. “What kind of feelings?”

He stepped closer, and the intent in his eyes said this conversation had tipped into no return territory. “I wanted you.”

Anna could barely breathe. “As in getting naked and...” She swallowed around the dry lump in her throat. “Having sex?”

“Teeth-grinding, earth-shattering sex. Which at that age I’m not sure is even possible. But that’s what I wanted with you.”

Her heart jumpstarted and battled with her common sense for supremacy. “Wow.”

He laughed, but the sound held no humor. “Yeah. Wow. My hormones were outracing my brain and winning.”

Stunned, Anna couldn’t think of a thing to say.

“As a teenager I wanted to kiss you,” he said. “But I was self-conscious. During the times I returned to Denver and saw you again, I realized I had these deep feelings for you. Remember three years ago when we went out to dinner one night and then a movie the next? Both times I choked. I couldn’t tell you that I wanted our relationship to turn more serious. Trying to forget you by dating other women didn’t work. They all fell short.”

Stunned, she remained silent, trying to process this surprising information.

He came a little closer. “It was a good thing I went into the military. It kicked a little sense into my ass. It was also good thing I wasn’t around you much after that.”

Renewed pain tore at her. “Why?”

“Because you would have broken my heart.”

“Me?” Incredulous, she gaped at him. “How? There was hardly time for me to break your heart when I rarely saw you except for an occasional holiday.”

“That’s just it, Anna. My career was very demanding. I could get assignments where I’d have seconds notice and couldn’t tell you where I was going or when I was coming back. Most women don’t appreciate that type of relationship.”

“Any woman that would hold that against you...” She trailed off as new recognition filled her. “Oh, damn.” Her voice softened to become contrite and apologetic. “I was about to say that any woman that loved you would put up with it to be with you. But when you left me at the Christmas party I got angry. I didn’t understand.”

He nodded. “All of the women I dated stopped seeing me the first time I had to say adios with two seconds notice.”

Anna tried not to picture Shane in bed with another woman, making love and then stopping because his pager went off. No, thinking like that would make her jealous.

Too late. I am jealous anyway.

He shifted, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Anna, there’s something else unresolved between us, isn’t there? I can see it in your eyes. Tell me.”

She’d never felt this off-kilter or this worried he would turn away from her.

Do it, Anna. It’s now or never.

“When my parents were killed in that car wreck in Canada, I called you. You promised you’d come to me. Instead, you were assigned to the Middle East doing secret squirrel stuff.”

He shoved one hand through his hair, pushing the thick dark strands away from his forehead. “The military doesn’t often take no for an answer. When they say jump, you ask in which direction and how high.”

Anna thought her heart would pound out of her chest, as exhilaration sent new life into her blood. Without warning he took two more steps toward her, leaving less than a foot between them. She plastered her back against the wall. The metal railing dug into her back. Renewed fire in his eyes said he was intent on doing something drastic. Danger and an untamed excitement zinged through her veins, her feelings of need and desire a perilous attraction she wanted to fulfill. His eyes pleaded with her to understand and showed a passion she wanted to explore, even if it meant getting burned.

Her gaze snagged on his mouth as he spoke again. “If there was anything, anything at all I could have done to reach you, I would have.” Remorse tugged his mouth into an ironic smile, his eyes filled with a strange sadness, and she realized he regretted what had happened. “I won’t make excuses. I can only give you reasons.”

She nodded, overwhelmed by this big, strong man’s apology. “Fair enough. I should have been more understanding. Want to hear my reasons?”

He smiled tenderly. “Yeah. Hit me with it.”

“I’m a grown woman, practically thirty-eight years old. But I let my mother’s way of thinking about men influence me far too much.”

“Ah, your mother. That explains it.” He winked. “She was a little domineering.”

Anna chuckled. “A little? Try know it all and seen it all.” She swallowed, her throat tight and dry with nerves. “Mom said you weren’t the type of boy she wanted me to associate with. And you know Mom didn’t want my brother to be friends with you. She never gave anyone an inch, even when they made an honest mistake. But that’s not the half of it. Mom caught Dad cheating on her several times. But she spent more time complaining about what he did and how

rotten men were than doing something about it. Maybe she found it easier to complain than she did to walk out or try and work things out with Dad. After hearing her constant “men are rotten” refrain for so many years, some of it stuck to me like glue. I’ve had to relearn another way of thinking. I had a few long-term relationships over the years, but they didn’t last. I couldn’t get close to those men. I never felt with them, what I feel when I’m with you.”

Shane’s hand came down on the wall next to her. A hot, fluttering sensation started deep in her belly, warming her with renewed excitement.

Clear heat in his eyes said he wanted more from her. “When I got back from Afghanistan I should have called you immediately. When I was there I thought about you often and wished things had been different. I wished I’d told you how I felt and kissed you until we both couldn’t stand straight.”

Warm, tender emotions filled her, and a second later sadness. “I wish you had, too. If something horrible had happened to you...” She heaved a shuddering breath.

He nodded, and silence enveloped them for a few moments.

Shane’s other hand came down on the wall beside her head, caging her between his arms. “You’re still holding doubts about me inside you. Come on, talk to me.”

How could she avoid it when his eyes burned with savage power? He’d confessed that he cared for and wanted her. She had to tell him the truth or feel this hollow sensation the rest of her life.

She touched his chest again, this time laying her palm against him with a gentle touch. The heat in his eyes went up a few degrees, propelling her onward. “At Christmas, I wanted to tell you how I felt. But I didn’t get the chance when you left so quickly.” She stepped away from the wall and nearer his tall frame. “You couldn’t help it if the U.S. Marine Corps decided you were indispensable. I was equally to blame for miscommunication. I could have confessed how I felt about you years ago. I could have called after I heard you were back in the States.”

He gave her one his trademark, off-the-scales sexy smiles. “Honey, you don’t know how good it feels to know you don’t hate me.”

“I never hated you.”

Relief flooded his expression. “Thank God. Anna, I need to know that while I’m your bodyguard that you’ll do what I say without question. This stalker situation is highly dangerous. If that bastard lays one finger on you, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

“You wouldn’t let him hurt me. I know that.”

Shane cupped her face again, then his hand slid into her hair. “Yeah, but it still worries me.”

Anna’s senses rioted. His skin felt so right against hers. “I remembered when we danced it was heaven.” Happiness filtered through and urged her to continue. “The way you held me, it felt special.”

Shane’s smile returned, brilliant and sexy. “I loved having you in my arms.” He brushed his thumb over her cheek.

She clutched at his shirt, as if he might leave her again. “So you didn’t kiss me that night because you didn’t have time?”

Regret drew a frown to his lips. “Yes, and I was afraid.”

Astonished that he would confess to fear, she smiled. “I’m having difficulty imagining you afraid of anything or anyone.”

He pushed his hands into the hair at the back of her neck and drew tantalizing circles against her skin. She shivered in pure ecstasy. “You’re the only person I’m afraid of. It’s always been that way.”

His breath touched her lips, and the heat rising inside her threatened to incinerate her control. “I never imagined I had that kind of power over you.”

“From the first day I saw you clutching your high school books to your chest, I knew I was a gonner. I also knew you were trouble. Still are.”

“I suppose you have a suitable punishment in mind?”

“Damn straight.”

His lips captured hers, tender and slow. Each exquisite brushing of his lips over hers, fleeting and exploring, drove her to arch against him. She slipped her arms around his neck, and his arms went around her waist. The sensation of his hot, hard body against hers made her tremble. She wanted more, and a moan parted her lips. He pulled back a and stared into her eyes. “Let me protect you, Anna. If anything happened to you—”

She put her fingers to his lips. “Hush. The answer is yes. I want your protection. I want...”

“What do you want?” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Don’t hold anything back.”

As his hands traversed her body, cupping and stroking, shivers of desire traced erotic paths from her breasts to other secret places she wanted him to explore. His hot, male scent drove her crazy with new passion. “I want you.”

“God,” he whispered against her mouth. “I can’t tell you how long I’ve waited to hear that. I’ll never let you down again, Anna.”

He cupped her hips and pressed against her. She could feel the force of his desire, and knew exactly what she would propose they do about the situation.

Feeling feverish and ready for anything, Shane finally gave into her magic. After they left this elevator, he would take her home. And if she wished it, he’d show her how much he craved her, in no uncertain terms.

“Tonight will be special, if that’s what you want.” His breath puffed hot against her ear.

When he kissed her ear, she pressed against him. “Oh, yes. Dinner, dancing, sex.”

Surprise almost made him pull back. Instead, he savored the quivering tension he felt building in her body every time he caressed her. “Mind-melding, explosive sex.”

“Mmmmm.” She shivered. “Sounds delicious.”

His hand slid up to capture her jaw in a light grip. “Twenty years is a long time, Anna. When we get home—”

She kissed him.

Shane thought his heart would burst as she showed no mercy. She clutched at his shoulders, detouring over him with a sensual touch that sent his body into meltdown.

That does it, honey.

He took over, his tongue sliding deep, stroking a new fire he never wanted to extinguish.

Anna’s excitement grew and ran molten. No man before ever made her willing to risk all. Shane’s kiss went to her neck, sending electrifying streamers of pleasure along her skin.

Before she could say a word, though, the elevator slid open. She jerked back, but Shane held her tight. The doors stayed open, and Shane made no move to step out.

A man stood in the opening.

A quick impression of lean and ugly flashed through her. Straight, razor cut blond hair fell about the guy’s shoulders. His pock marked face held sharp features and sour amusement at catching them necking.

Shane shoved Anna behind him, and his hand went to his shoulder holster. Before she could blink he had the weapon trained on the skinny man.

The scrawny man held up his hands. “Whoa, dude.” He made a nervous chuckle. “Take it easy, Cochise. I’m here to get you guys outta here.”

Anna peered over Shane’s shoulder. A closer look revealed the man’s work shirt with the name of his company.

Shane didn’t relax. “Let’s see some I. D.”

The repairman held his wallet out.

Shane gestured toward him. “Toss it here.”

“Whatever, man. You been drinkin’ too much caffeine? You’re lookin’ at me like I’m freakin’ Jack The Ripper or somethin’.”

“Or something,” Shane murmured as the man flipped his wallet toward Shane.

After Shane verified that the man told the truth, he apologized and threw the wallet back. “Sorry, Eric. Can’t be too careful.”

Anna stepped out from behind the Shane, and he put his arm around her.

The scrawny man blinked. “Hey, you one of those security dudes that works up at Taggart Security Team?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah.”

The repairman’s gaze slipped to Anna. “Got cargo, dude?”

Shane looked down at her and smiled. “Precious cargo.”

Eric held up his thumbs. “Awesome.”

Anna couldn’t help it; she laughed.

Eric grinned, his widely spaced teeth giving him a somewhat hideous grin. They thanked him for the help, then took the stairs down the remaining floors. Shane slipped out of the stairwell, his gaze assessing everything around him.

“Get back, Anna.” He backed up, and she stepped back into the stairwell. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

A shot rang out.

Shane sprang back, shoving her away from the danger. She heard Shane grunt as he fell, then she saw the red blotch spreading over his left shoulder, and she thought she would die there and then.

“Shane!”

God, no. Not now.

Three more shots rang out and Shane rolled over on top of Anna as if to shelter her. The wail of sirens filtered through the doorway. Screeching tires and shouts sounded.

Curses slipped through his lips. “Sounds like help is on the way.”

His voice sounded winded, and fear rocketed through her. She pressed her hand against his wound. “You’re hit.”

Shane levered himself off her, his face twisted in pain as he groaned. He turned away from her help. “Got to make sure that guy doesn’t get in here. Here—over against the wall—behind here in case he takes another shot.”

She grabbed his sleeve. “Shane, don’t go out there.”

He gave her a weak smile overlaid with pain. “I’m all right. Flesh wound.”

“And that’s why you’re turning pale and bleeding all over the place?” Anger mixed with fear. “Flesh wound, my ass!”

He gave a weak laugh. “Now is not the time for me to think about your beautiful ass, honey, as much as I’d like to.”

She wanted to punch him. “Shane Corelli, if you die on me—”

Shane opened the door and looked around the side, keeping crouched low to the ground. He let out a sigh. “It’s all right. The police have him down.”

He winced and his face went death white, then he passed out.

“Oh, my God! Shane!” She lifted his head into her lap and pressed her hand against the wound. “Someone help!”

Anna heard footsteps running toward them.

She leaned down to kiss him, her lips trembling. “Stay with me. I’m falling for you, damn it. Stay here with me.” Her voice broke and tears spilled from her eyes.

* * *

Shane pushed the hospital bed button so that he sat almost straight up. Anna snoozed in the chair next to his bed, her hair disheveled and dried blood on her clothes. When he woke up in the emergency room last night, he wanted to see Anna first thing. Hours later, when he’d awakened to find her at his bedside, tears stung his eyes. She’d looked exhausted, and he wished he could gather her in his arms. He’d fallen asleep with his hand tucked in hers.

Above it all, he wondered if he'd imagined hearing her desperate plea, "I'm falling for you. Stay with me."

He watched her beautiful face and savored the quiet moment. Seconds later she woke up and blinked. She smiled and came up to the bed.

"Why didn't you go home last night?" Shane said. "They've got that bastard in custody now. You're safe."

"I didn't want to be away from you." She leaned forward and brushed a kiss on his forehead. "How do you feel now?"

"Embarrassed as hell."

"Why?" She grinned. "Because I've seen you in one of these little skimpy hospital gowns?"

He laughed, then moaned. "Ouch." He reached up with his good arm and slipped his hand into her hair, grateful he could be here with her. "Because I passed out. I was supposed to be protecting you."

Anna sighed in vexation, and at the same time enjoyed the happy sparkle she saw in Shane's eyes. "You didn't pass out until the police had the guy in custody. You're not Superman, Corelli. You're a big, strong, exasperating, incredibly sexy hunk of a man. And you're my hero."

"Come here," he said softly.

After sharing a kiss that made her long for when they could be alone, tears welled in her eyes, and she reached for a tissue on the bedside table. She sniffed.

He frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I almost lost you."

"You could never lose me." He took her hand and kissed the palm, arousing new waves of pleasure inside her. "By the way, did I imagine it, or did I hear you say you're falling for me?"

Anna knew confession time had come. Her face felt hot. "Yes."

His smile took on mammoth proportions. "That's good. Because I'm falling for you, too."

Overjoyed at his words, she leaned in to give him another toe-curling kiss.

When they surfaced, he said, "You know what the marines say?"

"What?"

"Semper Fi. Always faithful. That's what I feel about you, Anna Wilde."

“Semper Fi, Shane Corelli,” she whispered against his mouth. “Semper Fi.”

The End

For another Taggart Security Team adventure, be sure to pick up a free copy of FEARLESS PERSUASION (Gareth Seaton’s story) at Denise’s website www.deniseagnew.com under “Freebies.” You’ll find the two full-length novel Taggart Security Team adventures that started it all, DANGEROUS INTENTIONS (Scott Danger and Kylie Chapman’s story) and TREACHEROUS WISHES (Kyle Hawthorne and Tammy Carter’s story) available at Ellora’s Cave www.ellorascave.com. Stop by Denise’s website for a full list of her books, excerpts, contests, a sign up for her chat loop and a sign up for her monthly newsletter.