



The Bodyguard (Harlequin Intrigue)

By *Lena Diaz*



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lena was born in Kentucky and has also lived in California, Louisiana, and Florida where she now resides with her husband and children. Before becoming a romantic suspense author, she was a computer programmer. A former Romance Writers of America's Golden Heart® finalist, she also won the Daphne du Maurier award. She loves to watch action movies, garden, or hike in the beautiful Tennessee Smoky Mountains.

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The monster sat across the breakfast table from Caroline, looking deceptively handsome in a dove-gray, thousand-dollar suit that emphasized his broad shoulders and the bulging muscles in his upper arms. The tanned hand that flicked the page on his electronic tablet was elegant, strong, with perfectly groomed nails.

They should have been talons.

Talons would have warned people who didn't know Richard Ashton III that those hands were lethal, especially when they were clasped into fists.

He skimmed through the latest stock-market figures, then looked pointedly at the untouched food on Caroline's plate.

In spite of the worry that had kept her awake most of the night, the worry that had nausea churning in her stomach this morning, she picked up her fork and took a bite of egg the cook had prepared exactly to Richard's specifications. She dabbed her napkin on the corners of her mouth as he'd taught her, before training her face into the carefully blank expression she'd learned was the safest.

His brows lowered. "You're getting too thin, Caroline. That displeases me."

She stilled, her fingers curling against her thigh.

"I-I-I'm sorry, Richard."

Calm down. He hates it when you stutter.

She fought back the fear that so often jumbled her words. "I'll eat everything on my plate. I promise." She took another bite of egg.

Tiny lines of disapproval tightened around his eyes.

Her stomach twisted. What had she done? She raced through a mental checklist. Her hair was neat and curled to drape over one shoulder in the style he preferred. She'd painstakingly applied the makeup he'd selected for her, natural looking but polished. She held her napkin in her left hand in her lap, her fork in her right, no elbows on the table. What had she missed?

"Don't look so alarmed," he chided her. He cocked his head, his eyes narrowing. "Or have you done something that requires further instruction?"

"No, no, no, I've been good. I don't...n-need another lesson."

Stop it. Calm down.

"Don't stutter, Caroline. It's unbecoming of an Ashton to stutter. Tell me, why aren't you eating enough?"

Her hands went clammy with sweat and shook so badly she almost dropped her fork. Desperation had her scooping another forkful of eggs into her mouth. As she chewed, she smiled across the table at him, trying to placate him.

He shook his head. "You're being rude. I asked you a question, and now your mouth is full. You're making me wait for an answer."

Stupid, stupid, stupid. She should have answered him first and then taken a bite. She swallowed hard, forcing the lump of eggs down her tight throat without taking the time to chew.

"I'm so sorry," she rushed to assure him. "I didn't mean to be rude. I w-wanted you to be proud that I was obeying, that I was eating." She wiped her moist hands on her pants.

"I'm still waiting for an answer."

She blinked. What was the question? What *was* it? She couldn't remember. He'd said something about her being too thin, and then he'd said-

"I asked why you aren't eating enough." His voice was clipped, harsh.

"I'm s-sorry. I guess I'm just...tired. Not hungry."

One of his elegant brows arched. "And why, *exactly*, are you tired?"

She grasped for an excuse, anything but the truth- that she'd lain awake most of the night, going over her plans, trying to build her courage.

"I-I don't know. Perhaps I worked too hard in the garden yesterday. I *am* a bit sore."

The slight reddening of his face had the blood draining from hers, leaving her cold and full of dread. He would take her comment about being sore as an accusation against him, a complaint. Because, as he frequently reminded her, it was always *her* fault when he was forced to teach her a lesson, *her* fault he had to punish her.

"You've worked in the garden plenty of times without being sore." His voice lashed out at her like a whip. "I'm more inclined to believe you're complaining that you forced me to teach you a lesson yesterday."

She dropped her gaze, her pulse slamming in her ears. A whimper bubbled up inside her, but she couldn't let it escape. Crying was undignified. Ashtons did *not* cry.

"Look at me when I'm speaking to you," he demanded.

"Please," she whispered, trying to appeal to the man he *used* to be, the man that must surely still be there,

somewhere, hidden deep inside, the man she'd loved once, so very long ago. "Please, Richard. It was a...poor choice of words. I'm sorry."

He plopped his napkin on the table and stood. "Yes, it certainly was, a very poor choice." He stalked to her chair.

She shrank back and hated herself for it.

The cook walked into the dining room, smiling a greeting at Richard, ignoring Caroline, as she'd been ordered to do. As they'd *all* been ordered to do. The staff knew Richard was the perfect, loving husband saddled with an unbalanced wife who made his life miserable—a wife who was to be ignored, for her own safety, lest she get too worked up. A wife who must never be allowed to leave the estate without her husband, except for her once-a-week errands, which were carefully timed and reported upon so Richard could immediately come to her aid if she became confused. Only Richard knew how to handle her, how to take care of her, how to keep her calm, or so they all believed.

At times like this, Caroline almost believed the lies herself. After all, she had to be insane to have stayed with the devil as long as she had.

"Mr. Ashton, good morning to you. Can I get you anything else, sir?" the cook asked.

His face smoothed out and he returned her smile. "Yes. Please let Charles know I'll be leaving a bit later than planned." He circled his fingers around Caroline's wrists and pulled her to her feet, smiling the entire time. "Have him bring the car around front in exactly one hour. Mrs. Ashton and I would like to...talk."

He added a wink that had the cook blushing and assuming exactly what he wanted her to assume—that he was a loving husband intent on loving his wife.

"Very good, sir." She hurried out of the room.

Richard's grip on Caroline's wrists turned crushingly brutal.

She gasped and tried to pull her hands back. "Please, you're hurting me."

He immediately let go, frowning at the red marks he'd left. "Later, you will change into long sleeves. I won't have someone misinterpreting anything they might see. Now, come along. Apparently yesterday's lesson was insufficient."

He put his hand on the small of her back. She tottered on shaking legs toward the winding marble staircase in the two-story foyer.

She could endure this. She could get through this. She could survive this.

Those three sentences went through her mind over and over, like a prayer, giving her the strength to climb the stairs with her husband at her side, towering over her, like a prison guard leading an inmate to the death chamber.

At the first landing, he caught her shoulders, turned her around and kissed her. She was so stunned she forgot to pretend to respond. He broke the kiss and pressed his lips close to her ear.

"Close your eyes, Caroline. Kiss me back."

She saw the reason then for his pretend affection. A maid had entered the foyer below. This was part of Richard's game, making others believe he was devoted to her. Appearances were everything to an Ashton.

His lips touched hers again. When the hard ridge of his erection pressed against her belly, she shuddered with revulsion. His arms tightened painfully around her bruised side where he'd kicked her last night. She fervently hoped he'd taken her shudder for passion instead of disgust, or her lesson would be more severe than usual.

He led her to the master bedroom at the end of the hall.

As he closed the thick, soundproof double doors behind them, she reminded herself again that she'd endured his lessons many times. She could survive one more. She had to. Because after today, she would be free. After today, she would never see Richard Ashton III again.

He yanked her long hair, jerking her backward, twisting her neck at an impossible angle. She sucked in a sharp breath, loathing and despair boiling up inside her. His eyes darkened with the anticipation she'd grown to dread, even as he shook his head like a teacher bitterly disappointed with his star pupil.

She knew what he would say next, the same thing he said every time he "instructed" her, the same thing he would tell her when he plunged into her bruised and battered body to slake the lust that always consumed him after giving her a lesson.

"I love you, Caroline. I do this *because* I love you." The disappointment in his voice might have been convincing if it weren't for the anticipation that had his mouth curving into a feral smile.

His eyes narrowed when she didn't rush to say what she was supposed to say.

Perhaps it was the knowledge that this was the last time she'd ever have to endure his touch that made her brave. She glared at him, refusing to give him the words he wanted.

He grabbed her upper arms, his fingers digging into her with bruising force.

The pressure made her cry out. Unwelcome tears pricked the backs of her eyes. "Please, stop."

"Say it!" His fingers dug harder, like the talons she'd pictured earlier.

Her vision blurred.

"I love you," she choked out, despising him all the more for the coward he'd forced her to become. But she would say the empty, meaningless words a thousand times if it would stop the blinding pain. "I love you, I love you, I love-

"And?" He shook her, snapping her teeth together, making her bite the inside of her cheek. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.

"I-I'm...s-sorry."

He abruptly let her go. She staggered back. A wave of dizziness sent her wobbling to the nearest piece of furniture in the expansive room, the four-poster bed. She clung to one of the thick posts. The pain that lanced through her upper arms made her cry out again.

His nostrils flared. He stalked toward her, shedding his clothes as he approached, his arousal stiff and heavy, an unyielding sword to wield against her. She cringed against the bed as the monster's perfect hand coiled into a fist.

Chapter Two

Another wave of nausea hit Caroline. She clutched the edge of the receptionist's desk and drew in deep breaths, fighting the dizziness that had plagued her since she'd dragged her aching body out of bed this morning. Richard's "lesson" yesterday had delayed her plans by a full day. But nothing would stop her this time. She'd just have to fight through the pain.

"Mrs. Ashton, are you okay?" The receptionist hurried around the desk, her youthful face mirroring concern.

"She's fine." Leslie Harrison, the Harrison part of the law firm of Wiley & Harrison, admonished the other woman. "I'll escort Mrs. Ashton to her car."

"Yes, ma'am." The receptionist resumed her seat, aiming a resentful look at her boss's back.

"Leslie, I'm actually not feeling all that well. Perhaps I should sit down for a moment."

"Come along, Caroline. You'll feel better when you get out of this stuffy office into the fresh air." She leaned in close. "It's just nerves." Her voice was low so no one else would hear her as she escorted Caroline outside the busy lobby. "You're taking a huge step today. Besides, you don't have a minute to waste if you're going to get to the new house before your husband discovers you're missing."

Caroline gave her a shaky smile. "I'm sorry. You've gone to a lot of trouble to help me. I don't mean to sound ungrateful." She clicked her key fob and unlocked the black Mercedes S600 sedan Richard had chosen for her. Not for the first time, she wished he would allow her to drive something simpler, less pretentious.

Leslie held the car door open. "No worries, dear. I'm happy to help. Remember, go straight to the new house. No stops along the way. Promise me."

"I promise."

Leslie smiled and stepped back as Caroline eased into the driver's seat.

A few miles down the road, another wave of dizziness hit. A sharp cramp shot through her belly. She yanked the wheel, pulling to the shoulder of the road amid a flurry of honking horns as other drivers swerved to avoid her.

Sweat popped out on her forehead in spite of the cold air blasting out of the air-conditioning vents. She tried to sit as still as she could, willing the dizziness and pain away. Being sore the morning after one of Richard's lessons wasn't unusual. But for some reason it was so much worse today. It must be nerves, as Leslie had said. She'd been plotting her escape for months. And now that she was actually going through with her plan, the stress was making her sick.

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth and clutched her cramping belly. Richard's extra lesson had almost ruined everything, making it physically impossible for her to do her Wednesday chores. But this morning it was Richard who insisted that she couldn't be lazy two days in a row. He'd ordered her to get out of bed to take care of the errands she'd skipped yesterday. Her eagerness to do his bidding had pleased him. What he didn't realize was that he'd given her a gift by ordering her to go.

After breakfast she'd stood at the door and waved goodbye to her husband for the last time while Charles pulled the Rolls-Royce around the circular driveway. Richard closely watched her through the rolled-down window in the backseat. His suspicious gaze had her clutching the doorway, worried she'd done something to give away her plans. But the car hadn't stopped, and Richard continued down the road toward his office.

Careful not to do anything that might trigger a call from the household staff to her husband, she'd stuck to her usual weekly itinerary of going to the dry cleaner's and then to the lawyer's office. The difference this time was that instead of dropping off her clothes with Richard's at the cleaner's, she'd only dropped off Richard's. She kept the small bag of her clothes and toiletries she'd carefully packed to begin her new life. Using the dry-cleaning trip as her excuse, she'd been able to carry her bag out of the house without tipping off the security guards that something was different.

After the cleaner's, she drove to the lawyer's office to deliver the accordion of tax receipts and documents to Leslie and to supposedly collect any papers Richard needed to review or sign. Of course, this week, there would be no return trip to give him anything. She wasn't going back.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joseph Woodruff:

Playing with family in the park, coming to see the ocean world or hanging out with close friends is thing that usually you may have done when you have spare time, after that why you don't try thing that really opposite from that. A single activity that make you not sensation tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you already been ride on and with addition of information. Even you love The Bodyguard (Harlequin Intrigue), you could enjoy both. It is fine combination right, you still wish to miss it? What kind of hang type is it? Oh can occur its mind hangout fellas. What? Still don't obtain it, oh come on its referred to as reading friends.

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Lesley Dwyer:

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