

Naughty Neighbor

Chapter One

Pete Streeter came awake on the third ring - just in time to hear the answering machine pick up the call. Streeter knew what the message would be; he'd been receiving the same one for three days. The message came at all hours of the day and night. It was untraceable, originating from public phones throughout the city. It was cryptic. A single word. "Stop." The voice was electronic. Streeter understood the warning. He also resented it. He swore softly, more out of habit than feeling, then rolled over and went back to sleep.

Louisa Brannigan looked up at her ceiling and tried to control the anger that was bubbling inside her. It was four-thirty in the morning and the idiot upstairs had just gotten another call. He got them all night long. Not that she cared, but her bedside portable phone picked up his signal. The phone rang a second time, sending her flying from the bed in a rage. "That's it!" she shouted. "I can't take it anymore. I need my sleep. I need quiet. I need . . ." She stood with hands and teeth clenched, eyes narrowed, nose wrinkled, but she couldn't think what else she needed, so she snatched the phone from her night table, marched into the bathroom, threw the phone into the toilet, and closed the lid. Almost at once, peace descended on her. "Much better," she said.

Three hours later Louisa opened a tired eye and stared at the digital clock beside her bed. She stared at it for a full minute before her brain kicked in and responded with a shot of adrenaline. She'd slept through the alarm. "Damn."

She hurled herself to her feet and ran to the bathroom with her red flannel nightshirt flapping around her calves. She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw the slim silver antenna caught between the toilet lid and seat. She'd drowned her phone. Raising the lid, she gingerly transferred the phone to the wastebasket. It was impossible not to reflect on the symbolism. Her life, like her phone, was in the hopper.

With no time to waste, she took a quick shower and dashed back to the bedroom, shaking her curly dark brown hair like a dog in a rainstorm. She peered into the mirror over her cherrywood bureau while she picked at her bangs and took stock: Dark circles under her bloodshot blue eyes, definite water retention, and she felt shorter than her usual five feet six. It was not going to be a power day, she decided, turning to her closet with a resigned sigh.

Three weeks earlier she'd celebrated her thirtieth birthday with lunch at the sedate Willard and a late supper at the Hard Rock Cafe. Be eclectic, she'd told herself. Go for it. This morning she wasn't feeling nearly so expansive as she pulled on panty hose and zipped herself into a black wool gabardine skirt. Her blouse was silk and matched the magenta suit jacket. Her earrings were big and chunky and gold. Her mood was dark and cranky.

She trudged to the kitchen, taking note of the grim fact that it was only Tuesday, wondering how she was going to make it through the week when the loser upstairs kept her awake all night long. She'd left polite notes on his front door. She'd called the rental office. To date, she'd avoided confronting him face-to-face. She knew it was a fault. She had problems with confrontation. She was aggressive, but she wasn't assertive. She was a wimp. The admission dragged a groan from her.

The truth was, her problems ran deeper than lack of sleep. She had a monster job that was growing more unwieldy with each passing day. In the beginning being press secretary to Senator Nolan Bishop had meant clipping news articles and keeping his calendar in order. Recently, he'd changed his profile to high, and the office staff was scrambling, trying to adjust to the pressure-cooker atmosphere. Her hours and her responsibilities had doubled. Her new role was exciting, but she was much more tense. Her personal life was nonexistent.

She dumped a handful of beans into the coffee grinder, punched the grind button, and took pleasure in the simple act of smashing something into miniscule pieces. She was developing violent tendencies, she thought. "Today coffee beans, tomorrow mass mayhem," she muttered. She had to get a grip. She dropped a filter into the top of the coffee maker, added the ground coffee, boiling water, and impatiently watched the coffee drip into the glass pot. She was grossly late, but she wasn't leaving the house without her coffee. There were certain rituals that shouldn't be sacrificed. In Louisa Brannigan's opinion, a civilized cup of coffee in the morning was what separated man from beast.

She poured herself a cup and felt a stab of satisfaction when she heard the thunk of her morning paper against the heavy wood front door of the two-story brick row house. Lately, Louisa had taken to telling herself it was the little things in life that really mattered. Lunch at the Willard was nice on her birthday, but fresh sheets, perfectly cooked pasta, glasses without water spots, and five minutes to leaf through the paper before leaving for work were pleasures she could count on day in and day out. She especially loved the five minutes she allotted for the paper. Five minutes of peace and sanity. Five minutes to enjoy her coffee and read the funnies. It wasn't too much to ask, was it?

Pete Streeter also heard the paper hit. When it suited him, Streeter occupied the apartment above Louisa Brannigan's. He had his own entrance, his own on-street parking, and his own hot water heater, but he didn't have his own paper delivery. Ordinarily, Streeter didn't give a fig about the morning paper, but there was a movie review he wanted to read this particular day, so he padded down a flight of stairs and snatched Louisa Brannigan's paper.

His door clicked closed a moment before hers was carefully opened. If he'd known Louisa, he might have smiled at the colorful cursing coming from the front porch, but he didn't know Louisa, so he took himself upstairs, oblivious to the outrage he'd aroused. He spread the paper on the scarred, butcher-block kitchen table and drained half a cup of industrial strength, scalding hot sludge from a twenty-five-cup coffee urn. He grunted at the movie review and shuffled off to his bedroom for a pack of cigarettes. When he got to the bedroom, he remembered he'd given up smoking. He muttered a few satisfyingly crude phrases and scowled at his cat. Scowling at the cat was one of

those gestures of habit that neither man nor feline took seriously. In truth, the cat was Pete's best friend.

Louisa narrowed her eyes and glared at the door next to hers. It was him. The oaf had stolen her paper. She'd never met him. Didn't know what he looked like. What she knew was that he came skulking in at all hours of the night, and that he played his music too loud. He leaked disgusting cooking smells into the heating system, left his laundry in the basement washer and dryer for days at a time, and more often than not parked his car in her parking space. She hated him with the sort of passion only forced cohabitation could produce. The man was scum.

She should bang on his door and demand her paper back, she thought. But what if he wouldn't give it to her? What then? She could hardly duke it out with him. He was probably large and hairy. And she couldn't prove that he had her paper, could she? It wasn't as if there were witnesses. All right, so she could do without a paper for one crummy morning. After all, she was late and probably didn't have time to read the paper, anyway. Right? Wrong. She'd allocated herself five minutes. Five lousy minutes, and the creep upstairs was reading her paper on her time. What was worse, he was getting away with it because deep down inside she was a wimp. She was afraid of the big, hairy slob who lived on the second floor. "Ugh," she said. "I hate being a wimp. I hate being a wimp!"

Okay, that does it, she told herself. She was not going to be intimidated by a man who thought fried onions and Spam were two of the four essential food groups. She thumped on his door with her fist, and then she gave it a kick. "I know you're in there!" she yelled. "And I know you're reading my paper!"

Pete looked up from the sports section and frowned. It was seven-thirty in the morning and some rude person was raising holy hell on his front porch. "This used to be such a perfect neighborhood," he said to his cat. "One block from the Metro stop, three blocks from the zoo, reasonable rent for Washington, D.C." He shook his head. "Now look at what it's come to . . . weirdos hammering on my door at seven-thirty in the morning." A shrill female voice carried up to him. "Uh-oh," he said, "it's the ditz downstairs, and she wants her paper." He kicked back on a kitchen chair and grinned. She was mad, and she was not being polite. He looked at his watch. She'd have to leave for work pretty soon. He could wait her out. "We'll let her cool off a little," he told the cat. "It's always best to avoid violent women."

Louisa gave one last kick. He was ignoring her! "Slimy, yellow-bellied coward," she shouted. "You're not going to get away with this! I will not be ignored!" She stomped back into her house and took the broom handle to the kitchen ceiling. Thunk, thunk, thunk. "This is for parking in my parking space. And this is for hogging the dryer. And this is for waking me up every night with your late calls." Thunk, thunk, thunk.

Pete sighed. She was becoming annoying. The floor was vibrating, and he could hear muffled shouts coming from the air duct. "I like to think of myself as a patient person," he said to the cat, "but she's starting to get on my nerves. I can't concentrate on the funnies with all this noise." He pushed away from the table and stood, searching through his jeans for a stick of gum. When he didn't find any, he gave another sigh and ambled out of the kitchen, down the stairs to the front porch. In her haste to harass

him, the woman-from-hell had left her door open, so Pete Streeter walked in and followed the racket to the kitchen. He took a wide stance, hands on hips, dark black brows drawn together, and bellowed over her thumping and shouting. "Lady, what is your problem?"

Louisa whirled around in midthump. "Ulk." Fury was quickly replaced with panic over the fact that there was a large, almost naked man standing in her kitchen. "Who are you? What are you doing in my house?"

"I'm Pete Streeter. I occupy the apartment above you, and you're ruining my morning with your ranting and raving." He grabbed the broom from her and threw it into the hall. "No more brooms. No more kicking my door. No more cussing at the top of your lungs." He paused to look at her. She was prettier than he'd imagined. Average height with a lean, athletic body and a classic oval face. Snappy dresser. Too bad she was such a fruitcake.

Louisa was temporarily speechless. She'd been right about him being big and hairy, she thought, but she'd been wrong about the overall effect. He was six feet, with a rawboned, tightly muscled body, low slung jeans that sat on slim hips, and the most glorious head of curly, shoulder-length brown hair she'd ever seen. It was rock-star hair. Hair she'd die for. "Is that really your own hair?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"You play in a band?"

"No. I write movie scripts."

Figures, Louisa thought, a flake from Hollywood. Her eyes narrowed. "You took my newspaper!"

"Sorry."

"I want my paper back."

"Be reasonable, I'm not done reading it, and you don't have time to read it now. You're late for work."

"How do you know I'm late for work?"

"Lady, I could set my clock by you. At five-thirty your alarm goes off. I don't know what the devil you do at that hour of the morning, but it involves a lot of door slamming. At six-thirty there's more door slamming. You take a shower, tune your radio to NPR, and force me to listen to news until you leave precisely at seven-thirty every weekday morning."

"I didn't know my noise carried up to you."

"Sweetheart, I can hear when your zipper goes down. And you shouldn't be talking to your mother about your dates. Time to cut the umbilical cord, you know?"

She felt the air stick in her lungs. "You listen to my phone calls?"

"Yeah, and it's pretty depressing. Why don't you move your phone away from the air duct -"

"Out!" she screamed. "Get out of my apartment, out of my sight, out of my life! I'm going to get Mace. I'm going to get a gun. If I ever see you again, I'll permanently disable you!"

Streeter grinned. "Must be awful to have PMS like this."

"Ugh." She smacked her fist against her forehead.

Washington was cold in February. Wind barreled up the open mall and wide avenues, and the sun hung shrunken and pale in the gray winter sky. The granite buildings seemed unrooted without their flower borders and the sere grass flattened under intrepid tourist feet. Street people huddled in plastic tents constructed over subway grates. Bureaucrats went about business as usual.

Louisa worked in the Hart Building, just north of the Supreme Court and northeast of the Capitol itself. She stretched at her desk and looked beyond the heavy teal-and-gold drapes framing windows that opened to an inner courtyard. It was six-thirty and the courtyard was dark. She was the last one left in the office, and the exodus of workers had slowed in the outside corridor. All things considered, it hadn't been a bad day.

She'd managed to keep her boss on schedule and lint-free through two luncheon meetings, an interview with a Post reporter, a question-and-answer session with forty fifth graders, and an afternoon tea at the Australian Embassy. She'd coerced their two interns into stuffing and stamping the monthly newsletter to constituents. She'd badgered the caterer into an affordable buffet for the spring fund-raiser. And she'd secured a slot for her senator on Good Morning America.

She retrieved her purse from the bottom drawer and pushed away from the desk. She buttoned her long wool greatcoat high to her neck, switched the lights off, and closed the office door behind her. She exited the building at C and 1st Street, and her attention was immediately drawn to two men arguing half a block away. One of the men was her boss, and she recognized the other as Senator Stuart Maislin. Maislin gave Nolan Bishop a jab to the chest with his finger, and Nolan went rigid, then stiffly nodded his head. Maislin stood with hands clenched for a moment, then wheeled around and climbed into the limo idling at curbside. The car pulled out into traffic. Bishop turned and quickly walked east on C Street.

Louisa was only mildly surprised. Maislin had a reputation for strong-arm tactics. He was a powerful man in the Senate, and some said he had Oval Office aspirations. It was also whispered about that he had bad friends. Louisa turned her collar up against the

wind and marched across the street, pushing the incident from her mind. Sometimes a blind eye was called for on Capitol Hill.

It was past seven when she emerged from the Metro station at Connecticut and Woodley. She turned left at Woodley and walked one block to 27th Street through one of the many residential pockets in urban Washington. The sidewalks were tipped from tree roots and worn smooth from generations of baby buggy wheels, roller skates, and leather-soled shoes. Four-story-high trees grew in the dirt median between sidewalk and street. The street was narrow from curb-parked cars and bumpy with patch jobs done by the D.C. Department of Transportation. It was a neighborhood pulling itself out of midlife crises, struggling with genteel neglect. It was a neighborhood of double-income families who required close-by gourmet takeouts and same-day shirt service.

She had her head down, searching in her purse for her key, when she approached her house. She gasped when she realized there was a large dark form on her porch steps. She pressed her lips tight together when she saw it was Streeter in an unbuttoned shearling jacket with the collar turned up.

He stood and held her paper out to her. "I thought I should give this to you personally."

"Why?"

He followed her up the stairs and slouched against her door, hands in pockets, feet crossed at the ankle. "You seemed unusually bent out of shape this morning. I thought maybe there was some special significance to this particular paper. Like, maybe you're a spy and there was a microdot in the Style section."

She stuffed the paper under her arm and continued fishing in her handbag. "I'm not a spy. I'm press secretary to Senator Nolan Bishop. I was unusually bent out of shape because I was tired, and because I hate you."

"How could you hate me? You don't even know me."

She paused in her search for the key and looked up at him. "I know you well enough to thoroughly dislike you. I'd give you specific reasons, but it'd take all night, and I don't want to spend that much time in your presence."

"This is about the phone calls to your mother, isn't it? You're embarrassed because I know you aren't sleeping with the guy you've been dating for the past four months."

"Get a life."

Streeter's grin flashed white in the darkness. "Why aren't you sleeping with him?"

"He doesn't appeal to me. We're just friends."

"So, who are you sleeping with?"

"I'm not sleeping with -" She clamped her mouth shut and shoved her key into the lock. "It's none of your business. Get out of my way. You're leaning on my door."

Forty-five minutes later she was freshly showered and dressed in a cream-colored silk suit. She slipped her feet into a pair of matching heels, shrugged into her ankle-length black dress coat, and groaned when she caught a glimpse of the clock in the kitchen. She was late for the senator's cocktail party. It couldn't be helped. She'd had to make calls to the coast, and then she'd had to wait for the calls to be returned. She let herself out, locked the door, and almost tripped over Pete Streeter. He was back to sitting on the porch in the dark. She squinted down at him. "I almost stepped on you. What are you doing out here?"

"Sitting."

"You're very weird."

"You're not the first person who's said that."

A car turned onto the street. Its headlights flashed against parked cars as it moved forward. Pete stood and backed into the deep shadows. He pulled Louisa with him.

"Let go of me!" Louisa said. "I'll scream. I'll turn you into a soprano. I know how to do it. I took a self-defense course."

"Don't flatter yourself. I'm not interested in your body. I just want you out of the light." That wasn't entirely true, he thought, but this wasn't the time to go into detail. The car cruised by, and Pete relaxed his hold on her. He reached into his pocket for a cigarette and grumbled when he didn't find one. He searched for gum and struck out on that too.

"What are you looking for?" She was almost afraid to ask.

"Gum. I'm trying to quit smoking."

Another car rolled by, and Louisa watched Streeter shrink back against the building. "Okay, what's going on with these cars?" she asked. "Every time a car goes by you duck out of sight."

"It's a long story."

She looked at her watch. "Can you do it in thirty seconds?"

"No."

"Make an effort."

"Some yokel's threatened to vandalize my car."

"Did you call the police?"

"Yeah, and they've made two pass-bys, but they can't baby-sit my car round the clock. So I thought I'd hang out here for a while."

A dark, late-model sedan turned the corner and proceeded down the street. The car slowed and then stopped in front of Louisa's house. Louisa felt Streeter's arms wrap around her and pull her flat against him.

"Move back against the wall with me," he whispered.

The sedan door opened and there was the sound of feet shuffling on pavement. A man approached a car at curbside, raised a sledge-hammer to shoulder level, and swung. There was the sound of glass being shattered. He moved quickly, smashing the windshield and the side mirror.

"Hey!" Pete yelled. "What do you think you're doing?"

A second man stepped from the sedan and leveled a gun at Streeter.

"Uh-oh," Streeter said. He threw his apartment door open and yanked Louisa inside.

Several shots were fired, and Louisa hung on to Pete Streeter as if he were life itself. Her heart hammered in her chest, and her breath refused to leave her lungs. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out.

Peter was having a similar reaction. He wasn't sure if it was the result of the gunshots or the fact that Louisa Brannigan had practically laminated herself to him. She had a death grip on his jacket lapels, and her leg was securely wedged between his. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. He thought about the proximity of his bedroom and wondered how long her terror would last. Long enough to maneuver her upstairs? Probably not. Besides, she was mentally unstable, he told himself. And she wasn't his type. And she hated him. One by one, he pried her fingers off the shearling. "You're okay," he said. "You're not hurt."

"He shot at us!"

"Warning shots. He wasn't serious. He just didn't want us getting in the way while he trashed the car."

He led her to the front porch, and they stood at the top of the stairs and looked at the damage. The windshield, back window, and driver's side window had been smashed. "That's odd," Pete said. "I drive a black Porsche, and the car that's been vandalized looks like a little black Ford."

Louisa couldn't believe her eyes. "I drive a little black Ford. I had to park in your parking space last night because you were parked in mine. They wrecked my car."

"Bummer."

"That's the best you can come up with? Bummer? First you steal my paper. Now you get my windows pulverized. And all you can say is bummer?"

"I didn't steal your paper. I borrowed it. And I didn't get your windows pulverized. It was fate."

"It wasn't fate, you imbecile! You constantly park in my parking space! Haven't you noticed there are numbers painted at curbside? Your car belongs in the space marked ten-thirty-eight B. My car belongs in the space marked ten-thirty-eight A. It's easy to remember. It coincides with our mailing address." Dear Lord, she thought, the only homo erectus dumber than this guy was the one who'd attacked her car.

"Boy, you get uptight about the damndest things," Pete said. "You need to relax a little."

"I used to be relaxed. I used to be well adjusted. I used to sleep nights. Then you moved in. You were gone for months. Why did you have to come back? You probably find it hard to believe, but there wasn't a single shoot-out in this neighborhood while you were away."

"Boring, huh?"

The man was dealing drugs, she decided. Long hair, Hollywood-type, drove an expensive car with a car phone. Next thing the house would probably be machine-gunned by some rival drug lord. Tomorrow she'd look for a new place to live. "I don't want to know any more about this," Louisa said. "I didn't see it. I'm going to pretend it never happened. I didn't like the car, anyway. It's the wrong color black."

She was babbling, Pete thought. She was on the edge. Probably because of her lousy sex life. Abstinence did terrible things to a person's disposition. He knew firsthand because lately his sex life wasn't all that great, either. "I guess we should call the police," he said.

She looked at her watch. She didn't have time for the police. "I'll call the police tomorrow."

"Bad move," Streeter said. "If you call the police now, they might be able to catch the guys."

"Listen," Louisa said, "I'm supposed to be at a cocktail party at my boss's house right now, and if I don't show up, I'm going to be in deep doodoo. You call the police. You probably have lots of experience with the police, anyway."

"Hold it," Pete said. "How are you going to get to this party?"

"I'll call a cab."

Pete stood there for a moment, grappling with an odd mixture of lust and guilt. He supposed he was, to some extent, responsible for the damage to her car. He shoved his

hand into his pocket and came up with a key. "That's not necessary. You can drive my Porsche."

Louisa felt her mouth drop open. His car? The car someone wanted to disintegrate? Was he kidding? "Nice of you to offer, but I couldn't possibly . . ."

She was reluctant to take him up on his offer because he had such a great car, he decided. She was probably afraid she'd get it scratched or something. He thought that was sweet. He took her by the elbow and pulled her down the stairs. "Don't worry about scratching it. It already has a scratch. It's on the right front fender just above the headlight."

She dug her heels in. "I'm not driving your car."

He gave her a shove. "What's your name?"

"Louisa Brannigan."

He opened the driver's side door to the Porsche and settled her in.

"Okay, Lou, have a good time and try to keep your speed down. It shimmies a little at one-twenty."

"Louisa! My name is Louisa!"

"Whatever."