

Counselor Undone

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Chapter 1

Michael Remington had never had to work so hard for a one-night stand in his life.

It went against his grain and his ego.

He'd long ago become jaded about love and all things Cupid, but he generally had no problem finding a casual bedmate when he wanted. As a named partner in a prestigious law firm with political connections and ties to the social elite of Kansas City, women practically threw themselves at him. Yet, here he was at a New Year's Eve masked ball—which in itself was a joke—looking for a woman who had made herself scarce. If he hadn't been the one to walk away from his elusive prey earlier, he'd think he'd lost his touch.

His best friend and law partner, Chase Hager, had finally gotten him to attend one of these lavish annual costume bashes in the hopes, Michael suspected, that he might meet someone special. Chase, or more accurately Chase's wife Grace, couldn't resist playing matchmaker. Eventually, they'd have to accept that he had no intention of getting married. At thirty-eight, he'd seen enough of his buddies take the plunge only to end up doing the sap two-step when romantic bliss turned into an episode of reality TV divorce court. He'd almost made that mistake once, with a firm colleague no less, and look where that had gotten him. He'd learned his lesson. He didn't believe in forever after and he didn't think this masked ball would net him a Cinderella.

The moment he'd arrived, he'd regretted his decision to come. He should have stayed home

and watched the ball drop over Times Square. Better yet, he should have gone to the office to figure out how a whole box of discovery documents had gone missing in his multi-million dollar patent infringement case. He planned to build the firm his father and grandfather founded into a national powerhouse. He wouldn't succeed if he dropped the ball on the intellectual property case of the year, a case journalists predicted would change the legal landscape for pharmaceutical patents.

Putting work out of his mind, Michael continued his search for his evening entertainment. She'd been wearing a Juliet costume. Other than that, he didn't know much about her. He hadn't even bothered to get her real name. It hadn't mattered. From the moment she'd spotted him, she'd been clearly on the make. Oh, he'd humored her when she'd tried to make conversation. He may be jaded, but he wasn't rude.

She'd made a pouty complaint about her Romeo having gone off "roaming" and suggested that he be her knight in shining armor. He'd laughed and responded, "Wrong costume." When she'd looked at him with a blank stare, he'd realized she couldn't make the distinction between a Roman gladiator and a knight of the realm. He'd wondered if all that reddish brown hair covered a natural blonde. Then he'd chastised himself for the insensitive stereotyping. A woman certainly didn't have to be blonde to be intellectually challenged. He'd met enough female cerebral lightweights to know.

Thinking Juliet would be good for an easy lay, but never one to rise above an occasional late night sexual tryst, he'd politely excused himself. He hadn't originally been in the mood to play the game tonight. Somehow, she'd figured out who he was. He'd recognized her type and the hunger in her eyes immediately. He avoided—or fought off—women like her all the time,

women set on attaching themselves permanently to a rich professional with a strong reputation in the community. He wasn't available for that kind of liaison. He had only one use for women currently—a physical use. Which is exactly where his one-night stand came in, if he could find her.

He glanced down at the two champagne flutes in his hand, tempted to down them both. He abstained. He'd probably already had one too many drinks tonight. After he'd escaped Juliet, he'd had a few to take the edge off. Mistake. That had only managed to slide his regret into boredom and then finally into frustration. His gladiator costume seemed to bring out the predator in otherwise reserved ladies. After being groped and propositioned relentlessly by women he knew—despite their masks and costumes—and a few he didn't, he'd decided to go with it. Maybe getting laid for the first time in four months would improve his disposition. Unfortunately, once he'd decided to give in to dimwitted Juliet's offer of a sure thing, she'd disappeared.

Michael stepped out onto the balcony of the penthouse condo and spied a lovely vision staring out over the railing. A smile took over his lips. He'd found her.

* * *

Mask still in place, a costumed Juliet stood at the balcony railing wondering why she hadn't left yet. The couple she was supposed to meet, her first cousin plus one, was nowhere to be found and she didn't know anyone else at this party.

She hated New Year's Eve parties. She didn't need to wax nostalgic over the past year. It had been full of betrayal and heartbreak. She'd left it all behind in Los Angeles four months ago and she never wanted to think about it again. As for New Year's resolutions, the only resolution that

mattered mandated letting nothing—and no one—distract her from making partner by the end of the year at the KC law firm to which she'd recently transferred.

She'd only come to this midnight-fest foray—against her better judgment—to appease her cousin. Then she'd compounded the mistake by letting her cousin arrange for her costume. She'd wanted Cleopatra, but a mix up at the costume shop led to the delivery of this Juliet getup instead. By the time she'd realized the mistake, it had been too late to make an exchange. She planned to give her mysteriously absent cousin a huge piece of her mind for pressuring her to attend this party because she “needed to meet new people” then leaving her high and dry.

She heard the sliding glass door open behind her and turned towards a walking piece of art wearing a gladiator costume.

Four...Three...

“Juliet! There you are!” the masked gladiator cooed, his baritone voice slightly singsong from one too many glasses of wine...or something. “I wondered where you'd gone,” he said, grabbing her by the arm.

Two...One...Happy New Year!

Despite the two flutes of champagne balanced by their stems in his other hand, he managed to turn her deftly into his embrace. “It's midnight, my pet. Come let me give you what Romeo can't.”

Plastic horn toots erupted inside amidst cheers as the gladiator slid his arm up her back, wrapped his hand around the base of her neck, and kissed her thoroughly. Juliet pushed hard against his chest. When she opened her mouth to tell him he'd made a mistake, he took the liberty of sliding his tongue inside to play wickedly with hers. She moaned softly, which caused

him to chuckle.

She didn't know who this man was or why he thought he had an open invitation to make love to her mouth, but her ability to think straight slowly evaporated like mist battling a summer sun. She'd never been kissed liked this—like the last beautiful woman on earth. Her libido sparked, making her excited and appalled at the same time. She'd been unattached for fourteen long months and this hunk's skill with his tongue sent hot flashes to an area of her body she'd almost forgotten existed.

Without removing his lips from hers, the gladiator backed her into a corner alcove west of the sliding glass door, not stopping until her back nearly touched the stone wall. With a bit of apprehension, Juliet realized darkness covered the alcove he'd selected, the few existing patio sconces not aggressive enough to throw their light around the turn in the wall. Her mind began to whirl. She shouldn't be here—not at this party and definitely not in this man's arms.

She needed to get a grip. Her arms pushed harder against his chest. "Please," she murmured.

"Umm," he hummed, pulling back slightly and handing her a glass of champagne. She accepted the glass on reflex. "Honey, there's no need to beg. Whatever you want, I plan to give it to you...*all night long*."

"You don't understand—"

"Here's to the New Year," he interrupted and lifted his glass dramatically. He paused, as if searching for a more mindful toast, but simply added with a wicked grin, "It's suddenly looking up." Tilting the glass all the way up, the gladiator downed the champagne in one gulp then tossed the flute onto a cushion-covered wrought iron chair not far away. "Drink up, Juliet," he said, wrapping his fingers around hers on the stem of her glass and assisting it to her lips. "Don't you

know it's bad luck not to drink to a toast made on New Year's Eve?"

Juliet took a brief sip while pressing persistently against his chest with her left hand. He budged a smidge. Her breathing came a little easier with the space she'd created between them until she realized his stingy costume left most of his chest bare. Her hand rested against the wall of his pectorals, and what a wall it was. He sported the physique of a Calvin Klein underwear model, all planes and bulges and six-pack. Those reawakened body parts began to liquefy.

"Y-You've made a mistake," she breathed, flustered by her unexpected female response to him. Even though she could count the number of lovers she'd had on half of one hand, she didn't lack sexual experience. Still, none of her lovers, even the man to whom she'd once been engaged, had stirred in her with a simple kiss a fraction of the heat currently rising inside her. "I think you're looking for someone else." *And that's a shame*, she thought, surprising herself.

The gladiator smiled down at her. She stood about five feet ten in the flat leather sandals she wore, but he still stretched several inches above her. He had to be over six feet tall. She'd gotten a brief look at his face before he embraced her and noted odd colored eyes in a rugged face. He wore his hair a little long and combed straight back. Given the paucity of the starlight, she couldn't quite make out the exact color of the tresses—black or maybe a deep brown. He qualified as objectively handsome by any woman's standards, but she didn't understand this intense attraction. Even with his olive-toned skin, he didn't fit her usual type.

Removing her champagne glass with one hand, he pressed his other over the hand she had against his chest. "No, milady, there's no mistaking you." He tucked his face into the curve of her neck. "Mmm, you smell good." His fingers lifted to play in the long spongy thickness of her wavy hair. "All flowers, and sweetness, and woman."

He trailed wet kisses along her neckline and showered her with words of seduction. The sound of his voice, two parts sexy and one part awe, stirred her. Juliet became enraptured by the words he whispered against her throat. She should have been offended, but something about his delivery made the litany intoxicating, tempting, even arousing. When he got to the part about what he wanted to do with his tongue, she shivered.

Wrapped in the feel of him, she didn't notice the hand he slid from her hair down to the split at the side of her costume. That hand invaded the fabric, moving past her thigh to caress the side of her rear as he took her mouth in another rousing kiss. The hand behind her still held the flute of her half-full champagne glass, but the burden didn't seem to slow him down. He pressed it against her back, pulling her against him from hip to shoulder.

The feel of his tongue sliding warm and moist across her lips, then along the length of her own, evoked sheer bliss. The long hardness of his arousal grew against her stomach. He slid his mouth to the hollow between her neck and shoulder. Through a haze, she became conscious of his fingers caressing the side of her bare bottom, the stringy thong she wore to avoid the show of panty lines giving him full access. His touch ignited long dormant hormones. As his fingers massaged the firm muscles of her buttock, her hips swayed against his in a manner that made him groan aloud.

When that old R. Kelly song about a little bump and grind began to play in her head, she decided she'd lost her mind. What was she doing in a darkened corner—outside no less—with a stranger, making out like a horny teenager? Something in her consciousness chided her that she needed to stop him. Yet, she couldn't muster the will to resist. She felt as if he'd put a spell on her. Maybe he should have come dressed like a warlock, she thought. He'd been looking for

another Juliet, but he'd magically homed in on the one so deprived of a man's touch that she'd let him have his way with her outside on an open balcony.

Everything happens for a reason, her grandmother always said. Taking grandmamma at her word, she wondered if there was a reason she'd ended up dressed like Juliet out on the balcony at midnight so that Mr. Gladiator could kiss her until she turned into a shameless hussy. At the moment, a reason escaped her, but perhaps she needed to accept the serendipity of the evening to truly appreciate the divine order. What would happen if she completely surrendered to the moment? Why not enjoy her first real New Year's Eve kiss—not counting the kiss from her godchildren last year—in three years? She felt long overdue for a serious, grownup New Year's Eve kiss so surrender to the moment she did, with gusto.

The act marked a defining moment in her life. Her nature didn't include spontaneous or frivolous. She was the intellectual one in her group of friends, the deep thinker, the analytical one. Known as a FranklinCovey planner junkie, she couldn't get through her day without a prioritized daily task list. She didn't take uncalculated risks and she didn't even kiss on the first date. Yet, despite those deep-set character traits, she slowly raised her hand, pushed her fingers into his thick, silky hair and kissed him back as if he were the love of her life.

* * *

The gladiator yielded to her unrestrained response and fireworks ignited inside him. Heat pulsed through his veins and a thousand pinpricks of light exploded behind his eyelids. The colors flashed brilliant, more magnificent than poppy fields on the way to Oz and just as dangerous. The onslaught to his senses stunned him. The unfamiliar feelings shook the buzz off his intoxicated haze, warning him that he needed to be more aware of the moment—more aware

of *her*.

The sound of her soft moan lured him further into her magic, but the need to breathe forced him to release her lips. “Damn,” he gasped, leaning his forehead against hers, his hand gently cupping the side of her head as his thumb rubbed her outer ear. “Lady, you pack quite a kiss.”

She chuckled softly. “You’re not so bad yourself, Spartacus.”

He smiled. “So, you figured it out.”

“Figured what out?” she asked with a puzzled look.

“Never mind,” he said, reaching for the mask that covered her eyes and the top half of her face.

“No,” she stated emphatically, staying his hand.

“I need to see your face.”

Her breathy voice betrayed her turbulent emotions. “No,” she said again, pressing more firmly against the hand he still had against her mask. She stepped backwards, deeper into the darkness, making it clear she had no intention of letting him see her face.

He watched her breasts rise and fall. Like him, she hadn’t yet recovered from that soul-shattering kiss. He looked into her eyes, which glowed a deep amber. He paused for a moment, thinking maybe he’d had a few too many cocktails earlier. He could have sworn her eyes were a soft green before. Shaking off the discrepancy as a trick of the shadows, he captured her hand and pressed his full lips against her palm in an open-mouthed kiss. Although she didn’t make a sound, he felt the deep inhalation that shuttered through her.

He looked down and rubbed his thumb against the soft skin of her upraised palm. His thumb continued across the plump veins on her wrist. Her pulse pounded. He kissed it with a gentleness

that seemed to startle her. Then, he turned her hand over and caressed down its back to the edge of her fingers. Her long, graceful fingers ended with well-manicured medium length nails, painted with nothing more than a clearcoat. As he rubbed her fingertips between his thumb and index finger, he realized they were her natural nails.

“You have beautiful hands,” he whispered. Subconsciously, he registered that her toffee complexion seemed more golden in undertone than the tanned hand he remembered touching him inside earlier.

To think, he’d been about to give up his search for her when he’d spotted her standing alone on the balcony. Taking advantage of the unusually warm December weather, she’d been out here without a wrap and he’d been silently grateful for the view of soft curvy hips and round full bottom. The snug plum velvet of her costume, with its mid-thigh split and wispy, diaphanous overlay had accentuated her womanly figure and billowed seductively around her ankles. How had he missed all those luscious curves before?

The disconnect between his encounter with her earlier and her current demeanor deepened. The woman he’d met earlier had been so obvious about her attraction to him. This woman acted as if she didn’t know who he was. Was she playing hard to get? It was a little late for coyness.

He placed her hand back against his chest, centering it over his heart. His heartbeat raced beneath her palm. When her fingers curled against his chest, the butterfly caress made him hum with appreciation. He moved against her, releasing her hand to its own temptation. “Do you have any idea what your touch is doing to me?”

“Wha—?” Her words were lost in the startled gasped that rushed from her lungs when his hand dropped and brushed down the front of her breast. Her nipples beaded instantly.

“Yeah, my problem exactly,” he murmured, stepping close until his manly bulge pulsed against her. “Everything about you makes me hard and swollen, too.”

Her eyes darted to his. Despite the dim light, he could read the desire burning in their depths. He slid his hand over her bodice. His fingers played along her nipple then he palmed her, relishing the feel of her against his hand. Her breast filled his grasp. She had to be at least a C cup, an all-natural C cup. The thought brought a smile to his lips. Pressing those happy lips against her neck, he massaged her budded peak with deep deliberate pressure. His hips moved.

She groaned as he began to lower his head, perhaps anticipating his next move.

“Wait,” she said, placing her hands on either side of his face to still its descent.

His voice pitched low, husky. “Wait for what, sweetheart?”

“I—I...”

He smiled at her inability to form words until he looked into her eyes. Whatever the vibes she’d been sending off earlier, she seemed to be having a change of heart. Sincerity and definiteness of purpose filled her gaze. A little confusion and uncertainty mixed in, but no coyness.

He felt himself being drawn to her. Something about her beckoned him to get to know her, and not only in the biblical sense. The melodic sound of her voice replayed in his head: *You’ve made a mistake. I think you’re looking for someone else.*

Suddenly uncomfortable, he couldn’t shake that feeling again that the Juliet before him differed distinctly from the Juliet he’d conversed with earlier. A moment of unease spurred by the thought she might pull away from him caused the fog around his brain to lift completely. He couldn’t pinpoint what had happened between his gathering of two champagne glasses to search

out a one-night stand and this moment of genuine human attraction, but he knew he needed time with this woman to figure it out.

He pulled her tight against him. “Be mine tonight, Juliet. Let me give you your first pleasure of the New Year.”

* * *

Juliet’s voice abandoned her. She managed only a small whimper in response to the gladiator’s entreaty. His nibbling lips returned to her neck. His warm hand against her breast coupled with his well-endowed shaft riding above the throbbing apex of her thighs built a pressure deep inside her feminine core, hinting that ecstasy lingered only a small pelvic alignment away.

Of their own accord, one of her hands moved to his hip and the other to the back of his head. A battle raged inside her. The level-headed intellectual in her kept telling her to nix this behavior before the stranger bashed her in the head, did horrific things to her and dumped her body in some toxic ditch making her a tragedy worthy of an episode of *Criminal Minds*. The passionate woman in her, the one she’d buried beneath a deluge of disillusionment and cured with a heavy dose of compulsive career focus, started fighting her way free of the self-imposed fourteen-month cell of abstinence.

She pushed against his hip, trying to put space between their thighs. “Please,” she tossed the impassioned plea at him...again, not really sure what she was asking. Was she asking him to stop? *Yes*. Was she asking him not to stop? *Yes*.

She’d never understood the notion of mixed signals. She’d always thought it a simple matter of you did or you didn’t—you wanted to or you didn’t want to. How self-righteously ignorant

she'd been. Heaven help her. Everything about this man turned her on and she didn't even know his name.

His hand dropped from her breast. "Tell me, Juliet, are you as wet for me as I am hard for you?" She squirmed as she felt his hand search under the folds of her costume. "I've got to know."

A deep flush spread through her body. She was wet. She blocked his hand with her leg, trying to shield the evidence of her arousal and stave off the orgasm that surely would occur if he touched her.

He squeezed his hand between her legs and cupped her center. He lifted triumphant eyes to hers. "Why would you want to hide this from me?" he murmured gruffly, his voice raspy with what sounded like near pain.

"I can't...", she started, but she didn't finish. Her train of thought vanished with the glide of his fingers over the damp satin panel of her panties.

"Don't deny me, Juliet. You're the best part of this whole miserable New Year's Eve for me."

Despite herself, Juliet felt the urge to rock her pelvis against his fingers. She bordered on emotional overload. She couldn't reconcile the pleasure she felt from his touch with the horror rising inside her for her uncharacteristically loose behavior. The notion that this man's kiss, his words, his illicitly placed fingers, could give her the most stimulating sexual encounter of her life both puzzled and overwhelmed her.

Her feminine walls started to pulse and tremble, but she couldn't allow him to continue. Slowly, she slid her hand down between them, inadvertently brushing the back of her hand

against his erection as she wrapped her hand firmly around his broad wrist. She heard his sharp intake of breath before she closed her eyes to steady herself. When she thought she'd conquered her emotions, she opened her eyes and peered up into his watchful gaze. "We have to stop." She squeezed his wrist. "*I* have to stop. Please, let go."

A few seconds passed before he moved. As he let his hand fall away, she saw the question building behind his eyes. He finally whispered, "Who are you?"

She hesitated a moment, gathering her thoughts as she contemplated her response. He seemed to realize that she wasn't the woman he'd come looking for. Did it bother him? He seemed simply curious, not angry. Her intuition told her that he wouldn't hurt her. After all, if he were a brute, he wouldn't have released her when she'd asked him to. *Right?* Nevertheless, innate self-preservation made her glance around for an escape route.

The gladiator placed a hand firmly against her waist to hold her in place. "Tell me your name. Your *real* name," he said. "*I have* to see you again."

Juliet's mind raced. *What have I done?* Surely, nothing good could come of a midnight tryst with an intoxicated stranger whom you almost let get inside your panties without even trading your real names. She needed to get away from here.

"No," she said, moving aside abruptly. "Let me go."

"Wait!"

Their voices overlapped right before Murphy showed up and showed out.

When she stepped away, she caught the gladiator off guard and he dropped the forgotten champagne flute he'd been holding. The bubbly liquid spilled down her back and all over her costume before the sound of shattering glass rent the air. Juliet jerked and the corded shoulder

gathers of her dress caught on the curlicue design of his epaulettes. She felt the fabric give way as footsteps sounded near the French doors of the patio. Her mouth dropped open as the bodice of her dress separated, completely exposing her to the waist.

A giggling voice carried across the night. “Are you *sure* no one else is out here?”

“Don’t worry, baby,” came a masculine reply. “You’re safe with me.”

Juliet watched with mortification as the gladiator’s eyes widen in surprise at the display of her naked breasts. He froze only momentarily before his reflexes kicked in and he clasped Juliet against his chest, pushing her further back into the shadows to shield her from view with his larger body.

The giggling increased as the amorous couple passed them in the night.

“See, I told you someone else would have thought of this,” the female voice admonished.

The deep male voice replied humorously, “Baby, they’re so into each other they won’t even know we’re here. C’mon. Let’s find our own private corner.”

As the footsteps faded, Juliet became very aware of her bare nipples squished against the gladiator’s chest. Strangely, instead of alarming her, the weight of him pressed against her felt oddly comforting. She knew he’d grabbed her to cover her wardrobe malfunction, which impressed her as oddly gallant under the circumstances.

“Thanks,” she murmured, pulling away to attend to her bodice, but she couldn’t get the shoulder piece back together.

“Here. Allow me,” he said, intercepting her frustrated fumbles. The chore stumped him as well until he realized that a small clasp hid beneath the gold cording. The clasp had bent slightly, probably from being snagged on his shoulder piece. He pressed it back into shape with a firm

squeeze between his thumb and forefinger then latched it closed over her shoulder.

Juliet slid the drooping panel from the other side of the dress back into place and stepped away from him, careful to avoid the broken glass around her feet.

“I have to go.” She spoke without looking at him.

“I really want to see you again.”

“No, you don’t,” she said with a shake of her head. She almost laughed when she looked up and saw the shocked expression on his face. “What you want is an easy lay. And I’m not that woman.”

“That’s not—“

She placed three fingers against his lips to silence him. “Look, this isn’t who I am.” She sighed before she continued. “I don’t know what came over me tonight. I’ve never done anything like this before in my life. Ever. So, you can forget about your all-nighter. You won’t be getting lucky with me. Unfortunately for you—well,” she laughed, “maybe for both of us really—I’m the kind of girl who needs a commitment, not the kind of girl you keep in your little black book for late night hookups.”

He removed her hand. “Whatever you say. All I’m asking is for you to give me a chance to find out who you are for myself.”

She laughed and shook her head again. “I don’t think so. Something tells me that after tonight, we’d be hard pressed to rewind to getting-to-know-you drinks or dinner and a movie. How about we simply leave it at our midnight rendezvous and I’ll pull this memory out whenever I need to be reminded that even someone as provincial as me can have a bit of a naughty girl inside.” She began to walk away.

He took a step forward. “At least tell me your first name.”

She smiled fully for the first time. “What? And ruin the mystique?” She made it all the way to the patio doors before she hesitated. She turned to see his pensive profile staring off into the night. “Hey, Spartacus,” she called.

He turned only his head towards the sound of her voice.

“You’re one hell of a kisser. Whoever your true Juliet is, she’s one lucky lady.” And with that she disappeared inside.

“*You* are my true Juliet,” he murmured, but she was too far away to hear him.

Chapter 2

More bothered than he cared to be about Juliet's refusal to tell him her real name, Michael stood at the balcony railing staring into the night. *New Year's Day*, he mused. *A day for new beginnings.*

He glanced down at the sparkling Christmas lights covering the retail and office buildings throughout the Country Club Plaza. The Kansas City novelty thrilled locals and holiday tourists alike. Over two hundred eighty-seven thousand multi-colored Christmas lights covered approximately one hundred thirty-nine square miles of Spanish-inspired architecture. The beautiful sight would stay lit for another two and a half weeks before being doused until the next annual lighting ceremony to be held, as per tradition, on Thanksgiving night.

From his position atop the upscale Wornall Plaza condo building, located on the southeastern edge of the Plaza, Michael could see the entire fifteen-block display. The postcard perfect visual made a fitting backdrop for what had turned out to be the most romantic encounter of his adult life. Two things were certain. One, he would never view a simple kiss in the same way ever again. Two, the woman he'd kissed tonight was definitely *not* the same woman who had basically accosted him earlier in the parlor.

The feel of his Juliet still lingered across his fingers and across his senses. He had a strange niggling sensation flowing across his consciousness. *Amore a prima vista*. He hadn't thought about it in a long time. He didn't believe in it—the notion that when a man met the woman right

for him, he would recognize her instantly.

As he stood there, Michael remembered his father telling him about the day he'd first seen his mother. His father always said that it had been "love at first sight." When he was young, Michael had loved listening to the story of how his parents had met. After all, his mother was beautiful. How could a man not fall in love with her instantly? Once he reached his teens, however, Michael became more skeptical and that skepticism had only grown. His personal experiences with women suggested that no such magic exists. In his opinion, what his father had felt for his mother amounted to lust at first sight and his father had simply gotten lucky. His mother turned out to be as beautiful on the inside as she is on the outside. More often than not, the women Michael encountered turned out to be calculating, manipulative and creatures of false passion or coyness.

How ironic that the most genuinely passionate encounter of his life had been with a complete stranger. The woman had been not only beautiful, but also spontaneous and sexy and the most naturally responsive woman he'd ever touched. And what had he done? *He'd let her walk away!* What the hell was he thinking?

Turning abruptly, Michael rushed back into the party and searched frantically through the crowd for Juliet's retreating figure. Packed from wall to wall, the normally cavernous room seemed tiny. Couples huddled together swaying on the makeshift dance floor and groupings of friends and acquaintances chatted and laughed. The crush made his search for one lone person dense work. Luckily, due to his six-foot-three-inch frame, Michael could see easily over about ninety percent of the party guests. When he didn't see Juliet immediately, he felt an unfamiliar wave of anxiety. Surely, she hadn't made it out of the party that quickly.

Anticipation slipped towards dread, but then he saw her. She stood on the platform leading to the front door talking on her mobile phone. She became animated. He couldn't hear her side of the conversation over the noise of the party, but he recognized the signs of distress in her expressions. She closed her eyes momentarily as she lowered the phone and blew out a breath. Her head dropped slightly and her other hand lifted to cradle the forehead she moved back and forth against her palm. The thought that she might have trouble concerned him. He moved towards her, his desire to find out her identity now coupled with the stronger need to make sure she was alright.

He'd only taken a few steps when she looked up and saw him advancing towards her. A look of surprise crossed her face. She turned quickly and reached for the door. She made only a brief glance over her shoulder as she slid out the door and closed it behind her.

A frustrated curse fell from Michael's lips. He muttered apologies as he pushed past people left and right. When he finally made it to the door, he swore again when his unsuccessful tugging revealed she'd locked the door. He simultaneously admired and cursed her ability to keep her wits about her while making a hasty getaway. When he finally swung the door open and dashed into the hallway, he saw her standing in front of the elevator located at the end of the hall.

"Wait!" he called.

She looked up at him and shook her head. A resonant ding announced the arrival of the elevator a mere second later. She raised her hand, palm out, as she stepped into the elevator. Michael couldn't tell if she meant to wave goodbye or tell him not to follow her. Either way, he had no intention of letting her get away.

Knowing he didn't have time to wait for the one and only elevator to return, Michael headed

for the stairwell. The overly bright white lights were a shock to his pupils after the soft yellow lighting of the hallway, but that didn't slow him down. He rushed down five flights of stairs, leaping down three and four steps at a time. The tinny reverberation of his footsteps on the metal stairs bounced around the whitewashed walls of the stairwell. The sound seemed to mock him with the possibility of failure. He made it to the lobby level and out the stairwell door in time to catch a glimpse of the hem of her gown in the revolving door at the front of the building.

Hope soared.

He followed her.

Outside, a taxi pulled up beside her. Michael stopped short outside the revolving door not wanting to spook her any more than he already had.

"Please wait," he called. "I just want to talk to you for a minute."

She hesitated and looked at him over the taxi door she'd already pulled open.

"Tell me your name."

She stared at him blankly for a few moments as if contemplating his request.

"Just call me Juliet," she finally replied.

"Okay. I get it." He threw his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "You don't want to tell me your real name. I'll have to live with that. For now." He ran his left hand over his hair and then took the plunge. "Let me buy you dinner tonight."

She shook her head at him, again. He was getting really tired of that.

"Tomorrow then or any day you choose. Give me a chance, Juliet. I realize I did not behave..." he finished delicately, "like a gentleman upstairs. And I apologize if I offended you. But, I promise I'm not an axe murderer or a stalker or generally a molester of women—"

She laughed then, a light airy sound that escaped her unbidden. "I don't know why," she said with a smile, "but for some reason, I believe you."

"Then have dinner with me."

"I can't. I don't think it's a good idea." He opened his mouth to protest, but she stopped him. "No. Try to look at this from my perspective." She paused briefly to duck her head inside the cab and murmur something to the driver. When she looked back at him, her lips were still turned up ever so slightly. "If we had met under different circumstances," she said, "I'm sure I'd find your dinner invitation flattering. Tonight, however, well...it...."

The hand she rested on top of the open cab door tightened noticeably against the doorframe. He'd taken a few steps closer while she'd conversed with the cab driver and could see her face more clearly now due to the streetlight directly above her. She looked away for a moment. He thought she might have been blushing. He couldn't tell for sure with her mask still in place.

"My friends are always telling me that I need to be more spontaneous." She looked back with a simper. "I doubt our meeting upstairs is exactly what they had in mind, but I'd like to be able to look back on tonight and remember it as my adventurous rendezvous with a sexy stranger. That will be a lot easier for me to do if I don't have to face you tonight or the next day or the day after that. Please try to understand. I need you to let me go."

For several seconds, neither of them spoke; they stood quietly regarding each other. Finally, he nodded and took a step back. She slid into the back of the cab. The taxi door made only a faint click as she closed it, but the snick reverberated in his ears as if it had been slammed. The psychologically deafening sound echoed the realization of an unexpected opportunity possibly slipping forever out of his reach.

* * *

Six days later, Michael sat at the large mahogany desk in his corner office staring blankly out a wall of windows while a tablet stylus did somersaults between the fingers of his left hand. He was supposed to be choosing a new second chair for his patent infringement case not browsing the downtown skyline from his twenty-fifth floor Remington Towers office suite near Crown Center. His best friend Chase had been his second chair, but Chase needed to step into the lead on another case because the wife of one of their equity partners had recently had a near fatal car accident and the partner needed time with his family.

A file folder of forgotten resumes sat open on Michael's desk. He'd read through them several times and had pretty much narrowed it down to one of two candidates. They both looked good on paper, but the non-quantifiable qualities that didn't show up on paper meant a lot as well. This was a significant case for his firm, both in dollars and legal notoriety. A successful outcome for the client meant important writeups in legal and business journals. It was the linchpin in his strategic plan to launch the firm as a national player in the world of business litigation. He needed to make the right choice. Yet, he couldn't force himself to focus on the task at hand.

Michael looked down at the electronic tablet on his desk. Maybe he should work on reconciling his calendar. He'd promised his younger sister Raina that he'd make time for the annual family Independence Day gathering. He'd committed to actually staying for the entire picnic this year and not simply putting in a guest appearance then rushing back to his office to bill more hours. That might be a tall order given the current status of his case. He hated to disappoint his sister, but he might not be able to help it.

Michael tossed down his stylus in frustration. The opponent's motion for summary judgment had arrived this morning. If the motion prevailed, it was game over for his client Metra Pharmaceuticals. While this would normally be enough to concern him, today a whole other distraction worried his brain. A week had passed since he'd touched her for the first time. Days had passed since the last time she'd crossed his mind, but for some reason, today the thought of her wouldn't leave him alone. *Juliet*. Where was she? What was she doing? Whom was she doing it with? The last question in particular bothered him.

He slid his hand in his right pant pocket and fingered the sterling silver chain he'd been carrying around for six days. He tended to finger it absently when his mind wandered to Juliet. He needed to get to work. If Chase caught him daydreaming about her again, Michael would never live it down. His law partner already ragged him heartlessly and without remorse about being hung up on what Chase had dubbed his "mystery woman." Michael knew better. Curious? Definitely. Hung up? Hardly. He had no intention of letting any woman put the shackles on him. Of course, you couldn't tell Chase anything. Chase and his wife Grace had been happily married for six years. Marriage wasn't for him, but he'd more than love another chance to experience that sumptuous creature he'd kissed by accident on New Year's Eve.

He'd searched for her after that night. He'd tried to let it go, let her go, but by the end of the next day he'd felt a driving need to find her. The search had required Chase's help since Chase's cousin had hosted the party. Chase contacted every one of the guests and inquired about each of their companions. They found the original Juliet—he'd known immediately she wasn't the one when she referred to his "knight" costume—but no one could identify his mystery woman as a legitimate invitee. He and Chase had concluded that, on top of everything else, his Juliet might

have crashed the party. It figured.

The guest chair to his right squeaked and Michael looked up, pulling his hand out of his pocket. What was that old expression? Think of the devil and the devil shall appear. Okay, so maybe it was “speak” of the devil, but for the moment, it was all the same.

“Chase,” Michael said, looking over at the ash blonde partner.

“Welcome back,” Chase replied.

Michael’s perplexed expression made Chase grin. “I’ve been standing in your doorway for several minutes. What were you thinking about?”

“Nothing.”

“Or should I ask *whom* were you thinking about?” Chase made absolutely no effort to hide the amusement in his sky blue eyes.

Annoyed, Michael turned squarely to his desk, picked his stylus back up and let it resume its somersaults. “Did you need something?”

At Michael’s curt avoidance of his question, Chase sighed. “Man, tell me you are not still hung up on your beautiful party crasher.”

“Don’t start with me, Chase. I’m not hung up. Let it go.”

“I don’t understand what it is about this woman. You couldn’t have spent more than thirty minutes with her tops.”

“Forty-five minutes,” Michael said. He’d looked at his watch when she’d driven off in the cab that night. It had been twelve forty-five a.m. exactly.

“I stand corrected,” Chase commented deadpan. Chase leaned back in his chair. “I’m starting to worry about you, man. It’s not like you to become so preoccupied with a woman.”

Michael looked up at his best friend and saw that Chase was completely serious for a change. Michael shook his head. “I don’t know what to tell you, Chase. I really can’t explain it. Something about her won’t let me go.”

Chase stared into his friend’s face. For the first time, Michael saw dawning acceptance that his interest in Juliet wasn’t some passing fancy.

“I can’t believe the untraceable, unnamable duplicate Juliet bewitched you so completely.” Chase ran a hand down his face and sighed again. “Michael, I did everything I could to figure out who she may have come to the party with. You’re going to have to face that you may never find her.”

“Intellectually, I know that.” Michael leaned forward, placed his elbows on his desk and laced his fingers together as he dropped his forehead into his palms. “But, my head isn’t winning on this. Something tells me she’s closer than I think.” Michael looked back up at Chase. “Something I noticed about her that night or something she said holds the clue to finding her. If only I could figure out what I’ve been overlooking.”

Michael Remington went dog-with-bone when on the trail of a missing link—that one piece of evidence that the adversary didn’t want found or the discrepancy in opposing counsel’s argument that would shatter the counsel’s whole legal premise. He did it better than any litigator in the Midwest. Many felt he did it better than any lawyer in the nation, which translated into several Fortune 100 clients on the firm’s roster.

“Look, man, you know I’ve done everything I can to find the mysterious Juliet. Hell, I admit I’m more than a little intrigued by the lady. She’s the first woman in whom you’ve displayed more than a passing interest in over a year. It’s the main reason I made such a pest of myself

with the party guests in an attempt to locate her. But, no luck.”

As Chase lapsed into silence, Michael saw the wheels begin to spin behind his eyes. Sensing trouble, Michael warned, “Don’t even think about it, Chase.”

“What?” Chase’s look of faux innocence almost made Michael laugh.

“I know what you’re thinking, and I’ll have none of it. I’m not interested in going out with another one of Grace’s friends.”

“What’s wrong with Grace’s friends?”

“There’s absolutely nothing wrong with Grace’s friends. I simply would rather not be privy to any more of Grace’s matchmaking. Do me a favor? How about you run some interference for me rather than keep encouraging her?”

Chase laughed. “You know my wife doesn’t need any encouragement when it comes to matchmaking.”

Michael smiled. “True.”

“You know, Michael, I’m beginning to wonder if your mother’s right.”

“Right about what?”

“She believes that despite not knowing her real name, you fell instantly and completely for the mysterious Juliet, which is why you can’t seem to move on.”

Michael waved his hand in dismissal. “My mother is a hopeless romantic.”

“That she is, but maybe she knows what she’s talking about. It seemed to work for her and your father—that whole get engaged after knowing each other only two weeks fairy tale. Have you seriously considered that maybe you’re—“

“No. I haven’t.” Michael dropped his hands and leaned back in his chair. His voice took on

an edge. “Enough about the missing Juliet. What brings you here?”

“Well,” Chase said with a smile that immediately made Michael more nervous than the direction their conversation had started to take. “I’m wondering if you planned to grace us with your presence at this week’s briefing session. The new laterals and associates have been here for months and you have yet to meet them.”

Michael released a sigh. He really didn’t feel up to the weekly war room session. “Can’t you continue to handle these on your own?” Despite being an equity partner in one of the city’s most well respected law firms, Michael often resisted the administrative oversight associated with keeping the firm coffers full. He loved the practice of law in and of itself. The analytical challenges of solving complicated legal issues and figuring out how to achieve success in the courtroom drove him. “You really don’t need me in there to help hand hold the little ones.”

Chase chuckled, well aware of Michael’s aversion to new lateral hires and young associates. Michael equated the process of training and mentoring the frequently unpredictable bunch with monitoring elementary school kids. The egos associated with the highly educated group of well-paid young professionals seemed to bring out playground level antics or, as Chase liked to refer to it, high school level drama.

“Look, you agreed to co-chair the Associate Development Committee with me this year. Yet, you’ve been extremely lax in your duties. Not to mention that you know I need to take over the Werner case from Jackson soon so you’ll need a new second chair for the Metra Pharmaceuticals case. At some point, looking at resumes isn’t going to be enough.” Chase leaned forward and picked up the folder of pedigrees Michael had been ignoring all morning. Chase flipped through the dossiers for the senior associates on their team. “Eventually, you need to meet these guys in

person to determine which one will suit your purpose best.”

Chase had a point. Michael picked up the folder of dossiers that Chase tossed back on his desk. No matter how many times he went over them, it always came back to the same two possible candidates—on paper. Time to evaluate the next level. He laid down the folder and placed the photo-included resumes of his top two candidates side-by-side on top of the folder.

Chase stood, taking passing notice of the two dossiers laid out. His six-foot-four frame towered over Michael’s desk. “Playtime’s over. You’re coming to the meeting today. I expect to see you in the South Conference Room in fifteen minutes. If you’re not there on time, I’m going to personally pick out one of the new female hires to come escort you down.”

Michael’s head jerked up. As he suspected, a mischievous smirk graced Chase’s lips. His friend had a wicked sense of humor and Michael knew he meant it. The only thing Michael hated more than the administrative duties associated with partnership was fending off the female groupies who considered him the firm’s most eligible bachelor. Every year, a new batch arrived. Sometimes, Michael felt like a mouse in a house with a dozen cats. He had to be careful when he came out of his hole. The Mediterranean complexion he inherited from his Italian mother gave him that perpetual tan look the opposite sex found attractive. Still, he’d learned that what the females were most interested in was the size of his bank account and the power associated with having the same surname as the firm’s founding partners.

“I’ll be there.” The last thing he needed was for Chase to sic some overzealous female associate on him. Chase had a knack for picking the ones with a biological clock ticking so loud it could be heard throughout the tri-state area. The last time it happened, Michael spent weeks trying to dissuade the young lady from her pursuit. There wasn’t a species on the planet more

tenacious than a female lawyer. He doubted even a mother lioness could hold her own.

“Good.” Chase turned and exited the corner office.

Michael’s chest rose and fell with a deep breath as he rubbed his left hand through his hair again. His Monday morning hadn’t stacked up so well. He’d let Chase catch him daydreaming about his mystery lady. He’d let thoughts of her distract him from the case he should have been working on. The plaintiff had made it clear they weren’t interested in settlement absent full assignment of any and all Metra Pharma patent rights in the new miracle drug at issue. If he survived the summary judgment phase, this case might actually go to trial. Looking at his calendar, he noted that would put him in court right around the Fourth of July picnic. Raina was going to skin him alive. On top of all that, he now had to go play mentor to the latest crew of young associates and not-so-young lateral hires.

He rose from his deep black leather chair, grabbed his suit jacket, and headed for the South Conference Room. He didn’t know why, but he had a sudden premonition that his day was about to get even more complicated.

Chapter 3

Jordis Morgan stood off to the side of the half-full conference room, gripping a cup of chai spice black tea. Subconsciously, she categorized the different personality types in the room. She excelled at reading people, a skill that proved useful during her career as a litigator. In some ways, she was an anomaly. She had a reputation as a fierce litigator. She rarely ever lost and could pick apart an adversary's case with the efficiency of a swarm of locust stripping a field of crops. Yet, her easy smile and a youthful demeanor lured opposing counsel into a relaxed mood that often resulted in their underestimating her. By the time they figured out that under her easy-going exterior laid the heart of a predator, she'd shredded their legal theories and left their clients defeated.

As she stood watching her colleagues, Jordis started with the women: bleached blonde, Elizabeth aka Lizzie—damsel in distress; brunette number one, Jamie—one of the boys; brunette number two, Alyson—hot-to-trot on the down low; strawberry blonde, Vivian—no nonsense career woman. She turned her attention to the men, but got distracted when Michael Remington walked into the conference room. Every female head swiveled his way and lingered a little longer than necessary to simply acknowledge his arrival. Even Jordis took a few extra minutes to admire the muscular, six-foot-three dark-haired lawyer in the tailored navy Armani suit. His confident loose-limbed walk said athletic. This man didn't simply chisel out a physique in the gym to impress the ladies; he used his body for activities more engaging than static barbell

repetitions.

Michael made his way around the room, shaking hands and introducing himself. He lingered with a couple of guys whose faces became particularly animated after introductions. Jordis couldn't make out the entire conversation, but it appeared that at least one of them might have attended Michael's law school alma mater. The younger of the associates, Jonathan, appeared to be the athletic type. The other associate, the group's egomaniac and possible brown-noser, was Eric Covington. Covington had wasted no time rubbing Jordis the wrong way. Her hand tightened around her cup as she watched him try to ingratiate himself with Remington.

When Remington finally excused himself from the dynamic duo and walked her way, he hesitated—just a second—before he extended his hand. A less observant person wouldn't have noticed the infinitesimal pause, but Jordis noticed.

“Michael Remington,” he said.

“Jordis Morgan,” she replied, shifting her cup into her left hand and extending her right.

She'd heard all about the firm's future managing partner. Rumored to be the hottest guy in the firm, he had a reputation as a chick magnet. A die-hard workaholic, he was rarely seen outside his office. She'd joined the firm shortly after Halloween and until today, she'd never met him in person.

Jordis never put much stock in rumors or innuendo, but she had to admit, the talk didn't do him justice. He didn't have a classically handsome face in a pretty-boy way. His features leaned towards the rugged, square-jawed with angled cheekbones and full brows below a balanced forehead. He had a straight nose that gave nice symmetry to his face. His brown-black hair hung long at the top and at the back where it brushed against his collar, but tapered around his ears. As

it lengthened, it took on a wavy pattern that hinted at a natural tendency towards curl. Those features together with his smooth olive complexion and athletic build combined for an animal magnetism hard to ignore. Up close, she also noticed that he had alluring gray eyes. She'd never met a man with gray eyes. She'd read about them in works of fiction and now seeing the real thing, she understood why hordes of women would fantasize about having a man look lustfully at them through gray lenses.

Michael narrowed those exquisite eyes slightly as he examined her face more closely. "Have we met before?"

"No." Jordis shook her head. "At least, not officially."

"Not officially?" he asked. Michael, who had continued to hold her hand, glanced down when she slid her hand casually from his grasped. "How so?"

"I've been working at the firm for over two months," she said with an easy smile. "Maybe you've seen me lurking around in the halls."

Out of the corner of her eye, Jordis caught Alyson McGovern watching her with a none-to-happy look on her face.

Michael slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks while he considered her answer. "Maybe, but I don't think that's it," he said with a shake of his head. His longish hair fell over his eyes. He reached up with one hand and pushed back the long strands.

Before he could make another comment, Chase called the meeting to order.

"After you." Michael stepped aside and motioned her towards the conference table.

"Excuse me, Mr. Remington."

Michael looked down to see Alyson smiling up at him.

“I was going to top off my cup of coffee,” she said shyly. “How about I get you a cup?”

“No thanks, Alyson. I appreciate the offer, but I’m good.” He motioned her to the coffee set up. “Why don’t you hurry and freshen your cup so we can get started.”

From her spot at the conference table, Jordis watched Alyson step away from Michael Remington with a smile that immediately turned into a frown once Michael couldn’t see her face. After topping off her coffee cup, Alyson moved to the conference table and placed her cup in front of her seat before adjusting the wide leather waist belt on her navy blue long-sleeved designer shirtdress. Alyson glanced up at Jordis and gave a fake smile. Jordis returned the smile in turn, internally pleased at the disappointment masked on Alyson’s face.

Jordis didn’t have time to examine why the interchange between Michael Remington and Alyson pleased her so much because Michael surprised her by walking over to the coffee set up and pouring his own cup of coffee. Jordis discreetly looked over to catch the expression on Alyson’s face as the woman took notice of the gesture and the silent message it sent: Michael Remington wasn’t one to be played up to. It would seem that Ms. Hot-To-Trot would have to up her game if she was going to make a serious play for the sexy partner. Why that thought pleased Jordis even more, she would have to examine more closely later.

* * *

“Okay, the last order of business,” Chase stated, looking around the table, “is to select this year’s litigation pro bono case.” He reached for a file folder an arm’s length away on the conference table, slid it to rest in front of him, and flipped it open. “Each of you has a copy of the five potential cases selected by the Pro Bono Review Board. The matter is now open for discussion. Recommendations?”

Michael looked casually around the table. He covertly evaluated this latest crop of lawyers, trying to determine who was likely to have a long-term stint at the firm and who was likely to be gone by the end of the year. While good grades and high test scores were important, they encompassed only a small part of what it took to be a great lawyer. He believed in recruiting from the top ranks of prestigious law schools, but intangibles such as drive, discipline, empathy, and integrity meant as much as academic success. Talent alone was never enough. When they got lucky and found associates with the triple combination of academic talent, emotional intelligence and those amorphous intangibles, then he knew they'd hit pay dirt.

Michael lifted his cup of now cold coffee and tried to focus on the discussion going on around the table. He was having an unusually hard time paying attention during each discussion topic. He sat at the opposite end of the table from Chase and the long-legged associate with the unique name sat two chairs down on his left. When he'd introduced himself, her beautiful hazel eyes had taken him off guard. The swirls of browns, golds, and greens mixed together to make an alluring tapestry of color. When she'd walked away from him to take her seat, he'd followed the sway of her hips with his eyes and had looked up to catch Chase watching him with a questioning look. He'd taken a quick glance around to see if anyone else had noticed where his eyes had been trained. No one had seemed the wiser.

Michael angled his conference chair to the left out of habit and leaned back in the comfortable leather swivel rocker. With his right foot propped over his left knee, he kept Jordis Morgan directly in his line of vision. Every once in a while she'd flick her left hand and rub her left wrist. She wasn't wearing a watch. He wondered if she'd forgotten to put it on this morning and she was subconsciously missing it.

She had nice hands with long fingers and soft skin. She wore a French manicure tipped in beige instead of white. She kept those hands busy, either running her fingers casually around the rim of her cup or fiddling with her pen. The constant movement of her hands fascinated him. He could imagine those hands trailing languidly across his naked body. The place on his anatomy he'd most welcome her touched twitched at the thought.

He couldn't take his eyes off her, though he made sure to be discreet. He'd noticed her immediately upon walking into the conference room. She'd stood alone over by the west window bay sharply dressed in a gold-colored blouse paired with a black suit. Even though the suit's black pencil skirt stopped decorously right above her knees, the cheetah print pumps she wore accentuated the shapely length of long legs. He noted that she and only one other woman in the room wore business attire that made them look professional without hiding their womanly assets.

High cheekbones graced an oval face. She wore discreet makeup, but her eyes appeared large and seductive. Arched eyebrows perched over those hazel eyes that appeared slightly more golden at the moment due to the gold tint of the blouse that draped nicely across her shoulders and chest. She'd removed her suit jacket so he could appreciate how the color of the blouse complemented her toffee brown skin. She wore her hair straight with the front pulled back off her face and secured at the base of her neck with a flat barrette. Its fullness fell down between her shoulder blades in a straight blanket of chestnut brown.

There was something so familiar about her. Where had he seen her before? Maybe subconsciously he did remember her from a pass in the hallway, but he felt he was missing something. When she opened her mouth to be the first to lobby for the landlord-tenant matter of a single mom in a depressed neighborhood, he shifted his awareness of the discussion from the

back of his multitasking brain to the forefront.

“Look, sweetheart, I feel for the little inner-city single mom as much as the next person,” Eric addressed her with barely disguised superiority.

Michael’s right hand, which had heretofore been absently twirling his pen against the yellow legal pad in front of him on the table, stopped abruptly.

Did he just call her ‘sweetheart’?

Michael saw Chase slowly raise an eyebrow, leading Michael to believe that he hadn’t imagined the comment.

“However, we have the opportunity to be the legal face of a major patent dispute that could lead to some historical legal precedent. Plus, here we have an everyday guy whose brilliant innovation has apparently been ripped off by a major corporate conglomerate.” Eric leaned forward in his chair, clearly getting into his pitch. “It’ll be great PR. We’ll be touted for fighting for the underdog. We shouldn’t pass that up for a case that could easily be handled by Legal Aid.”

Jordis leaned back in her chair and simply stared at Eric for a moment. Michael watched a slow smile creep across her face. He’d swear he’d seen the same look on the face of his uncle’s favorite barn cat right before he took out a family of rats. He thought to intervene, but something about Jordis’s relaxed poise made him bide his time.

“Excuse me, *studly*, but I thought the point of the firm’s Pro Bono Program was to make a difference in the community, not to select cases based simply upon improving the PR profile of the firm?”

Eric glowered at Jonathan, to his right, who had come down with a sudden coughing fit at

Jordis's use of the word *studly*.

“Legal Aid is a charitable organization with a finite annual budget,” Jordis continued.

“There's no guarantee that they'll be able to take on the woman's case, at least not immediately. I'm sure that if the patent case has such promise, some firm will be more than happy to take it on a contingency fee basis. Besides, we already have a pretty high profile intellectual property case on the firm's docket. Using the Pro Bono Program to add another smacks of personal hubris not community service.”

“Jordis, I can understand wanting to fight for the social underdog,” Eric's voice held a slight edge of condescension, “but let's look at this logically for a moment.”

Jordis lifted an unopened water bottle from the table, twisted the cap off, and took a sip. Setting the bottle back on the table, she slowly swiveled her chair to the right, crossed her long legs and responded with a quiet air of nonchalance, “Logically?”

Eric grinned his pretty-boy grin, expecting his charm to carry the day. “Exactly.”

Jordis smiled back, not with joviality, but with the look of someone who recognized an insult and intended to pick up the gauntlet that had been thrown down before her.

Michael watched the foot Jordis dangled in the air swing up and down twice. He tried to keep his eyes on her ankles, but his eyes were drawn up her legs to her shapely calves and beyond to where her black pencil skirt had ridden up her thighs. His thoughts wandered to what she might be wearing under that skirt. A vision of Jordis uncrossing her legs to plant her cheetah-pump shorn feet wide enough apart to give him a peek flashed through his brain without warning. The image hit him hard and shocked him with the instant hardening impact on the muscle between his thighs.

Looking up from Jordis's thighs, Michael's eyes met those multi-colored orbs he found almost as entrancing as her legs. She was watching him. Her eyes seemed to shift color. Her facial expression remained neutral, but he knew she'd noticed where his attention had been focused. He dropped his foot to the floor and turned his seat squarely under the table, needing to be discreet about his lap's abrupt change in appearance.

Dammit. He couldn't believe he'd been caught, not once but twice, during a rare flare of female gawking. He didn't usually ogle woman, particularly not at the office. He had a strict personal policy against fraternizing with associates or any firm staff. He'd learned the hard way while a junior associate working with his father and grandfather that having the Remington name on the building and on his driver's license made him a target for schemers and goldiggers. If they couldn't coax him into marriage or trap him into fatherhood, they weren't beyond claiming a consensual encounter constituted sexual harassment.

"So," Jordis replied to Eric Covington, shifting her attention back to the discussion at hand, "are you saying that you feel I didn't use logic when evaluating the case the first time around or that you simply feel I'm completely incapable of making a logical, coherent analysis without your assistance?"

Eric's smile faltered a little at the edges. "I didn't say anything like that. All I'm saying is that we need to look beyond personal biases and analyze each possible pro bono matter objectively."

Michael leaned forward in his chair. He didn't like the direction the discussion had taken. He was about to put a stop to it when Chase warned him not to interrupt with a subtle shake of his head. Michael accepted the warning and held his tongue. It didn't sit well with him, but Chase

had been shepherding the group alone for the last few months so he would defer to Chase's judgment for the time being despite instincts that made Michael want to grab Covington by his collar and drag him to the little boys room for a chat.

Jordis's direct gaze never wavered from Eric's face.

Eric held his hands palm up toward Jordis in a gesture of truce. "There's no need to get defensive. Let's not make this personal."

The corner of Jordis's mouth lifted in a half smile. "Oh, *let's*," she replied with a lilt on the last word. "Eric, why don't you explain to us exactly what personal biases I might have towards this particular client?" When Eric didn't reply immediately, she continued, "Is it the fact that she's a single mom or that she lives in the inner city or is there some other connection you believe we have?"

A vacuum of sound permeated the conference room as everyone stared at Eric, waiting for his response.

Michael watched Eric's jaw tense as the young man ground his rear molars firmly together. Michael could see the anger stewing beneath the macho surface. Eric realized that Jordis had put him on the spot. He either had to retract his statement or come up with a very creative answer. If he told the real reason for his comment, he'd reveal himself as an insensitive jerk with a penchant for the personal biases he had claimed should not be a part of the discussion. If he lied, he was unlikely to come up with a response anyone considered plausible, let alone believable. If he failed to answer, everyone would simply assume that he based his comment on racial stereotypes. It was a no-win situation.

Michael looked over at Jordis. She sat relaxed, a neutral yet pleasant expression on her face.

Her right hand found its way back to her mug and her fingers once again traced around the rim of the cup. She had the demeanor of one simply waiting for her opponent to make his next move on the chessboard. He wondered if she were this cool in court. The lady was no shrinking violet. She handled tough situations head on and took the direct approach to handling personal affronts. He liked that about her.

Michael sat back in his chair, waiting to see what Covington would do. As he did so, he glanced back over at Chase who simply gave him a little tilt of the head as if to say, *I told you so*.

* * *

Eric Covington was not a happy camper. He stood watching Jordis Morgan walk out of the conference room chatting conversationally with the redhead. By the time the pro bono case discussion concluded, Jordis had won the day and the single mom had new legal counsel.

“Hey, dude, don’t feel bad,” Jonathan said to Eric as he swatted him on the shoulder. Jonathan’s eyes followed Eric’s down the hall to the retreating back of Jordis Morgan. “You know that if you’re going to take on Ms. Morgan, you’d better have done your homework. That lady probably has the sharpest mind in the department. Hell, probably the whole damn firm. Don’t let the pretty face fool you. Underneath that ladylike exterior lies the heart of a pit bull.”

“*I* have the sharpest mind in the department,” Eric replied.

“Well, it sure didn’t come off that way today, *studly*. Keep telling yourself that.” Jonathan laughed as he gave Eric’s shoulder another pat then headed for his office.

Eric knew Jonathan was right. Jordis had made him look like an idiot and in front of Remington, the future managing partner of the firm. By the time they’d finished debating the

intricacies of their respective preferred pro bono cases, he'd come off as a pretentious snob. She'd made it look like he had assumed because of her race she'd have some special affinity for the inner-city dweller and the plight of a single mother. He'd looked even more foolish when she'd pointed out the prospective plaintiff was a young white woman named Cynthia Gardner who had gotten pregnant at the end of her senior year of high school. Rather than stand by her, her high school sweetheart chose to accept a college basketball scholarship and abandoned the teen to her own devices. Having been put out by judgmental, self-righteous parents, the single mom had found it hard to support her child alone straight out of high school without state assistance and subsidized housing.

Granted, he probably did have some preconceived notions about how Jordis had gotten her lateral position in the firm. He knew diversity initiatives were all the rage in major law firms across the country. No matter the firm propaganda about simply being more aware of subconscious biases that had excluded qualified candidates in the past, he knew that women and minorities got special consideration. No way that leggy, supermodel type had credentials or a professional record to match his. He intended to be the star senior associate of the class and he wasn't going to let some woman upstage him. His father always said that a woman had two places: behind a man or beneath him. Jordis Morgan needed to learn her place—behind him like the rest of the women in the group. Then again, he thought as he watched her feminine curves and cheetah pumps disappear down the hall, maybe her place was beneath him. Getting her in his bed would certainly give them a better outlet for the sparks that seemed to fly whenever they were in the same room.

Eric slid his hands into his pockets and creased his brow. He looked over to find Remington

watching him. Chase put his hand on his Remington's shoulder and guided him out of the room.

Eric nodded at the two partners then headed for his own office to consider his next move.

Chapter 4

Jordis sat at her desk looking up at Vivian, who perched herself on the arm of one of Jordis's guest chairs. Vivian's lips twisted with barely contained mirth.

"Okay, Viv, what's on your mind?"

"So, what did you think of Mr. Managing Partner finally gracing us with his presence?"

"*Future* managing partner."

"Whatever. So, what did you think of Mr. *Future* Managing Partner?"

"What's to think?"

"Oh come on, Jordis. Every woman in that room looked like she wanted to dump chocolate all over him and lick it off."

Jordis chuckled. "If you say so, Vivian."

"If I say so?" Vivian leaned forward. "Are you telling me you didn't find the elusive Mr. Remington to be something short of yummy?"

"Look, he and Chase are our supervising attorneys. I'm not even going to go there. Besides, he's not really my type."

Vivian gave an unladylike snort. "If that man isn't your type, then either you don't do white guys or you're gay."

Jordis silently shook her head, an indulgent smile on her face.

When Jordis failed to respond, Vivian pushed, "Well, which is it?"

"What difference does it make?" Jordis flipped open the file folder on top of her desk and picked up her pen. Vivian ignored the dismissive action. "You need to get out of my office and go bill some hours."

"Oh, come on, Jordis. Don't be such a spoiled sport. Give me something here." Vivian slipped into the chair. "Are you going to make this a three-way competition for Mr. Remington's affections?"

"Three-way competition?"

"Yeah. Everyone knows that Alyson has the partner in her sights. And all Lizzie talks about is how *gorgeous* Michael Remington is. You'd think that child had never seen an attractive man before."

Only a few years out of law school, the blonde Lizzie was the youngest of the bunch and still had a college-sorority-girl vibe going on. Jordis half expected her to drop her books the next time she came across Michael Remington in the hall with the hope that he would stop to pick them up for her.

"Well, Lizzie is still young. I doubt the guys at her law school had quite the machismo of Mr. Remington. I suspect those twenty-something hormones of hers are pinging all over the place." Jordis dropped her pen back on her desk. Vivian clearly wasn't going anywhere until she'd gotten to talk this thing through. "What about you? Wouldn't it be a four-way competition?"

Vivian laughed, leaned back and crossed her legs. "Honey, I definitely don't do white guys!"

That made Jordis laugh, too. "Vivian, you're a mess!"

The redhead simply smiled at her, a genuine smile. A down home kind of girl, Vivian lived a what-you-see-is-what-you-get lifestyle. She treated everyone the same unless you did something

to prove you didn't deserve her friendship. It was one of the many reasons Jordis liked her. She had the looks to play the sexuality card to get what she wanted if she so chose. Natural blonde strands laced her long red hair, making it look like it had been set on fire by the sun. The striking color almost didn't seem real. She had green eyes and flawless fair skin sprinkled with a few freckles across her upper cheeks and the bridge of her nose. Despite her classic Irish beauty, Vivian was all about being taken seriously for her work. But, she did have one major flaw: she was a diehard gossip. If office gossip existed, Vivian would ferret it out and happily share what she'd learned. Jordis had no intention of sharing any personal opinions with her, whether about Michael Remington or anyone or anything else.

"Look, Vivian, there is no way I'm dishing with you about Michael Remington. You aren't going to stand around the coffee machine gossiping about me. Alyson and Lizzie are welcome to him. I've got one thing in my sights: partnership at the end of this fiscal year."

Vivian gave Jordis a look that suggested she doubted whether or not to believe her. Ultimately, Vivian must have decided to take her at her word because she rose to leave.

"Okay, beauty queen, if you say so. But, fair warning. Alyson's a vulture. If you decide Mr. Tall-Dark-And-Wanted floats your boat after all, watch your back. She's not above putting a knife in it."

Jordis grimaced. Not because of what Vivian said about Alyson. Jordis had figured that much out on her own. What grated her was the "beauty queen" moniker. She knew others called her that behind her back and she hated it. Vivian was the only one with the guts—and the integrity—to call her that to her face and she mostly did it to get a rise out of Jordis.

Vivian noticed Jordis's grimace and chuckled on her way out the door.

* * *

In Michael's office, Chase leaned against the closed office door with his arms crossed over his chest. Michael lounged on the office sofa. "Okay, start talking," he said, placing his feet up on the mahogany sofa table and crossing them at the ankles. "Is it always like that?" Michael asked.

"See what you've been missing," Chase responded with a grin.

"What's the deal with this Covington character?"

"He's a real piece of work isn't he?"

"He's an arrogant, sexist prick is what he is."

Chase laughed. "Yeah, that too."

Pushing off the door, Chase came to sit in the lounge chair perpendicular to the sofa.

"So how did we end up with Mr. Personality?" Michael inquired.

"He's the nephew of Stormy Willis over in Business & Finance. Apparently, he went to a top tier law school, finished in the top third of his class and has an impressive courtroom record. And, of course, no one is more impressed with his credentials than Covington himself."

"Clearly," Michael responded. "Do he and Morgan go at it like that every week?"

"No," Chase stated with a grin. "You just got lucky today."

Michael snorted.

"No, seriously," Chase continued. "Eric has pretty much been condescending to everyone in the group. I think he considers himself the self-appointed leader of the class. As you witnessed today, he tends to be more patronizing to the women. He's been testing Jordis's buttons for weeks now. Until today, Covington hadn't pushed her too hard and she's responded with enough

fire to check him but hadn't pulled out any heavy artillery. For some reason today, Covington decided to grandstand to make a point. Perhaps he was trying to impress you."

Michael snorted again. "Yeah, right. He certainly failed at that."

Chase nodded his head. "Well, I've been waiting for the day Jordis decided to take off the kid gloves. I always suspected that in head-to-head combat, I should bet on the lady."

Michael gave an appreciative whistle. "Man, she's one cool customer. Is she always that smooth?"

"I've never seen her lose her temper, but rumor has it she's not a lady you want to cross. From what I could find out about her, when she goes after an opponent she does it with a smile and the finesse you just witnessed earlier. Apparently, they don't realize they've been sliced and diced until they're lying bleeding on the floor."

Chase rose and wandered over to Michael's desk. He looked down at the two dossiers staring up at him. He picked them up and turned back to Michael. I guess now you have a better understanding of your possible replacements for me. Chase tossed the dossiers onto the coffee table, one of Eric Covington and one of Jordis Morgan.

"Yeah." Michael placed his feet on the floor. "I certainly like Jordis's fire. Not to mention that she clearly does her homework. She spouted the relevant facts from the Gardner file without once looking at any notes. That's impressive."

"The entire group is really bright, but yeah, Jordis stands out when it comes to the details. She's helped me out a couple of times with some motions and a few deposition preps. She has a real knack for reviewing large quantities of information and finding patterns and connections that others seem to miss."

“And if I were grading them on their arguments today, Covington wouldn’t make the cut.”

“Well, then, I guess you have your answer.”

Michael wasn’t so sure. He had no doubt that the lady lawyer would perform beautifully as his second chair. Even Chase seemed to agree with that, but the sexual effect she’d had on him today gave him pause. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d gotten a hard-on in a business setting. Hell, he didn’t think he ever had. If she could have that effect on him in a full conference room when they weren’t even interacting directly, what would happen if they began to work closely together?

Chase wondered at his friend’s silence. “Michael?”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“Maybe? What maybe?” Chase shook his head. “A mind like a steel trap, exceptional debating skills and extensive courtroom experience. What’s your maybe?”

“I don’t know.” Michael blew out a breath. “Nothing. You’re right. Jordis is the clear choice.” It wouldn’t be fair to select Covington over her because he couldn’t keep his libido under control. He’d simply make sure to keep his focus on the case and off those gorgeous legs. Michael's mind drifted for a moment.

Watching the barely suppressed half grin on Michael's face, Chase said knowingly, “Not to mention, all that comes in a package perfectly designed to make a man want to come home to her every night.”

It took a few seconds for the comment to register with Michael. He looked up with a frown. “Hey, you’re a married man. You better be returning to your own home every night.”

“I’m married, not dead. My eyes work just fine. As do yours apparently,” Chase said with a

look that dared Michael to challenge him.

Michael's expression went veiled. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, *please*," Chase scoffed, pushing to his feet. "You forget to whom you're speaking. You can drop the poker face, because I know you too well to fall for that. I saw you checking her out... more than once."

Michael looked at Chase without responding.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Chase headed for the door. Before he opened it, he turned back towards Michael and posited, "You know, it looks like Ms. Morgan is going to shake things up around here in more ways than one." Smiling, he added, "Perhaps the cure for your infatuation with the New Year's Eve mystery woman is in the office around the corner and down the hall."

Michael flipped him the bird. Chase laughed and exited the office. Michael could still hear him laughing after the heavy mahogany door clicked shut.

* * *

Michael spent the afternoon and most of the next day trying to dissect the weaknesses in the Dexter Drug motion for summary judgment, without success. Golden skin, hazel eyes, and gambles the stuff of erotic fantasies kept traipsing across his concentration. He wanted to talk to her again. That niggling feeling that he'd met her before still bothered him. He was uptight and on edge and he knew she was the cause. She drew him on a biological level even though his intellect kept sending his impulses the exact opposite message.

He pushed up abruptly from his desk and grabbed his duffle bag. Maybe a good hard workout would help take his mind off the distracting Ms. Morgan. He knew he needed to talk to

her about stepping into the Metra Pharmaceuticals case, but he wasn't ready to do that yet. He would put it off until next week. He needed the time to get his head on straight, maybe even get laid. He suspected his drought in the area of sexual relations fueled a lot of his lusty enthusiasm for Ms. Morgan.

Michael worked himself hard in the weight room then took a two-mile run around the track. By the time he finished, he was loose, sweaty and relaxed. A quick shower made him feel like a new man. Running his fingers through his hair under the heat of the blower dryer reminded him that he was overdue for a haircut. He hadn't been in court recently so the length of his hair hadn't been a concern for him. He'd always worn it long in college; it had gotten him more play with the ladies. Now, longer hair didn't gel with his professional, killer litigator persona, but he wouldn't worry about it until he needed to appear in court on his current case.

Michael headed back to work. The rest of the afternoon and evening was productive, but he found himself in the same predicament the following day. He also found himself in the weight room and on the track the following day and the two days after that. It was even worse on the days when he saw Jordis. Now that he knew she was at the firm, he felt as if he were constantly running into her in the halls or at the elevator. It was like buying a new car. Once you owned a certain make, the number of similar cars on the road seemed to multiply by a thousand.

Pondering his new daily two-hour workouts and the woman who drove him to his increased time in the gym, Michael strode towards the elevator Thursday night. The faint sound of music interrupted his thoughts. Michael lifted his wrist and noted eleven fifteen on the face of his TAG Heuer Caliber 6 watch. As he rounded the corner, he noticed the light on in Jordis's office.

Jordis sat at her desk listening to a tune with a relaxed groove while she reviewed the

documentation in an open file folder. Her bare feet were up on the edge of her desk, bopping in time with the music, and the file was propped against her knees. In her hand, she held a refillable twenty-ounce travel mug that she sipped from absently every few minutes.

That's the way Michael found her when he stopped at her office doorway. Why he'd passed this way tonight instead of taking his usual route to the elevator—which took him in the opposite direction—he didn't really want to analyze at the moment, nor the rush of adrenaline at the sight of her.

Michael sat his briefcase down at his feet and leaned against her doorjamb. Those long legs enthralled him as much the first time he'd seen them. He noticed her toes were painted in a French pedicure to match her fingers and that even her bare feet were sexy. Every once in a while, she'd sing along under her breath with the female vocalist about *working what you've got*. She hadn't noticed him yet. He wondered how long it would take. Until she did, he contented himself with watching her.

* * *

Sensing a presence at the door, Jordis went still. She slowly glanced over at the doorway. Michael stood with his jacket pulled back so that he could rest his hands in the pockets of his pants. The stance accentuated how the tailored cut of his trousers caressed his muscular thighs. Today, he had paired a charcoal gray suit, possibly Gucci, with a soft lilac shirt and a shiny skinny silk tie in a deeper almost royal purple. Above his square jaw and strong chin, his full lips pressed together as if he were deeply pondering something. A wavy wisp of hair had fallen across his olive-toned forehead touching the top of the dark brow over his left eye, giving him the appearance of one of those rugged sporty types displayed in Armani or Dolce & Gabbana

cologne ads.

Her breath caught in her throat for a moment. She hoped Michael thought it was because he'd startled her—which he had—but, in truth, her breathlessness was due more to an unexpected kick of hormones than a frisson of fear. “How long have you been standing there?” She picked up a small white remote control and pointed it towards a tuner on her bookshelf to turn off the music.

“Long enough.” He ran his fingers through the wavy lock across his forehead, pushing it back into place.

Jordis's eyes followed the movement. She'd seen him do the same days ago during the team meeting. Now, like then, she wondered what it would feel like to run her fingers through that hair. Something about Michael Remington exuded sexual energy. She was uncomfortably aware of him as a man and that wasn't good. When she'd spied Michael leaning against her door, a soft *mmm mmm* had reverberated through her head. She'd had a similar reaction when he'd walked into the conference room three days ago. He had a slight swagger to his walk that she didn't usually associate with men of his background. When he'd walked into the briefing meeting, all her girly parts had started to vibrate. She'd convinced herself it was objective appreciation for a beautiful male specimen. Like appreciating a male model in a magazine ad, you could look all you wanted, but you knew you'd never actually touch. Then when she'd caught him staring at her legs during her tête-à-tête with Eric Covington, it had taken all her self-control to stay on point with Eric and keep her voice from reflecting the tremors in her belly set off by Michael's perusal.

She no longer felt sure what she experienced when seeing the partner qualified as simple

aesthetic appreciation. Those girly parts were vibrating again and she needed to cut it out. He was one of her supervising attorneys for Pete's sake.

Michael moved from the door and walked over to her desk. "You know," he said, picking up the file folder she'd dropped on the desk, "I'm usually the last one out of the office at night. It's after eleven o'clock...." His last sentence trailed off in a distracted manner.

A gruff clearing of his throat made her look up. He kept his face neutral, but his eyes were focused on her lap while he rubbed his hand against the back of his neck. A quick look down by Jordis revealed that her unladylike position hiked her brown pencil skirt up past mid thigh. Heat of embarrassment slid up her neck. Aware of where his eyes were trained, heat of another kind slid down her spine and radiated through her feminine core. She quickly put her feet on the floor and adjusted her skirt.

Michael looked away as she slid her feet into a pair of brown three-inch leather platform pumps with ankle straps. "What are you still doing here?"

"Chase made me lead counsel on the Gardner pro bono case, " she said while leaning from her chair to buckle one of her shoes. "Since I've got a deposition tomorrow on my trademark infringement case, I wanted to get up to speed today because I'm meeting with Ms. Gardner the day after that."

He looked up from the file. "That's Saturday."

She smiled at him. "Yes, sir. I'm well aware of the weekly calendar."

Shit, he thought, taking in the full force of her smile. *And what's with the "Sir" crap?*

"That's good to know...*ma'am.*"

He said it with a straight face, but Jordis sensed his facetiousness. She smiled to herself. She

never would have suspected him of having a sense of humor. He seemed so straight-laced and buttoned up.

“The client works every weekday and has to pick her child up from daycare by a certain time every night. I didn’t want her to have to miss time at work to meet with me or have to pay someone to watch her child. She has enough challenges without it costing her money to meet with lawyers that are supposed to be helping her for free. Saturday afternoon worked best for her schedule.”

“She’s bringing the child with her?”

“Yes, she is. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, of course not. It’s your case,” he said in an offhand manner. “I’m surprised you don’t think having the child here will be a distraction.”

She rose to pack up.

“I’ve not yet met her child so I won’t assume he’s a problem until he proves himself to be one.” She reached up and took the pro bono file out of his grasp and placed it in her designer MK signature tote bag. “Between his mother and me, I think we should be able to handle one toddler.”

Michael watched her gather her things, impressed by her sensitivity to Miss Gardner’s needs. Many lawyers who handled pro bono cases were of the opinion that they were doing their clients a huge favor and therefore, expected the clients to jump through hoops to be deserving of the gratis representation.

“I’m sure you will be.”

Jordis grabbed a wide leather belt with a gold buckle off the desk and cinched it onto her

waist before reaching for the chocolate brown suit jacket that coordinated with her skirt. Michael stepped around the desk to help her with her jacket. He could tell by her reaction that the gesture caught her off guard, but she hesitated only a moment before allowing him to pull the jacket onto her shoulders. He liked the feel of her silky white blouse as it brushed against his knuckles. The smell of her perfume, a hint of sweet and floral with a crisp aquatic note, drew his mind from her late night lawyering habits to her womanly curves. Without thinking, he fingered a length of her hair as his hands fell away from her shoulders.

The touch surprised Jordis. She looked over her shoulder at him. She could tell from his expression that he had surprised himself with that action. An odd feeling tugged at her soul as she pondered the irony of him caressing her hair when only moments earlier she'd been daydreaming about what it would feel like to touch his.

Michael took a quick step back. "I'll walk you to your car," he said in a clipped tone. He headed for the door and picked up his briefcase.

Jordis turned towards him. "That's not necess—."

"Yes, it is," he said, cutting her off. "The parking garage will be abandoned this time of night."

"Security will—."

"I'm your security for tonight," he stated, jaws tight in a don't-argue-with-me position.

She just stared at him. His demeanor had gone short and gruff in a split second. *What was his problem?*

"But," he looked her in the eyes, "if you're ever here this late by yourself again, make sure someone walks you to your car. The security desk is too far away from the garage for them to be

of much help if someone decides to make mischief.”

He waited for her to respond.

She made her way to the door, annoyed by his demeanor and his tone. “You know, I’m a big girl and—.”

“Yes ... you *are*.” He gave her a long, slow perusal, making it clear he appreciated all the grown parts of her. When his eyes made it back to hers, he stepped closer, put his hand against the base of her neck and placed his thumb along her jaw line. In her three-inch heels, she could nearly look him in the eyes. If she leaned forward the slightest bit, they’d be kissing. His voice dropped to a bedroom whisper, “But you do realize that big girls get accosted all the time?”

His cologne—something woodsy and seductive—seemed familiar as it wafted across Jordis's senses and stirred her underworked sex drive. Those magnetic gray eyes held her and her heart began to pound. She knew she should step away from him, but she couldn't get her legs to move. She suddenly had an inkling of what a Cobra's prey must feel like, held paralyzed by eyes that hypnotize even knowing a fatal strike was imminent.

“I expect you to be careful. No case is worth your safety. Okay?”

She wanted to tell him to stop treating her like an idiot; that, of course, she paid attention to her safety when she left the building. That's what Jordis would normally have done. She didn't like being told what to do by anyone, let alone by bossy macho types. Right now, however, she struggled to keep her concentration on something other than his lips. They were full without being large and their shape fascinated her. When he spoke, they were almost sensuous in movement. As she became conscious of her thoughts, warning bells started dinging in her head. Having a pissing contest with her boss about safety precautions late at night seemed foolish at

the moment when a whole other dynamic seemed to be at play, especially when he had a point. She needed to end this confrontation before she did something stupid, like lean up those last few inches and press her lips against his.

“Okay,” she agreed in a voice softer than she intended.

His gray eyes darkened to the color of cumulous clouds. Her voice had come out breathy and flirty. The thought made her cringe internally. She didn’t do breathy and flirty. What was this guy doing to her?

Michael held her gaze for a long moment, his thumb rubbing seductively against her skin. When Michael's eyes dropped briefly to her lips and then to the pulse beating rapidly at the base of her throat, Jordis broke contact and reached down for her tote.

His expression shuttered as he mumbled, “I’ll take that.” He lifted the bag from her and merged it into his left hand with his own briefcase. “Let's go,” he said as he placed his free hand against the small of her back.

The gesture came automatic to him, but after the moment they’d just shared, they were both acutely aware of the location of his hand, which stayed put all the way to the elevator bay.

Jordis looked over at him after a few steps. She wondered why he continued to guide her along, but she did not shake off his touch. His eyes had darkened. The depth of color gave him a smoldering look that sent waves of adrenaline pulsing through her veins. She felt like the protagonist in one of the thrillers she liked to watch on television. She had the sense that ominous music should be playing in the background, the kind that presaged that getting into tight quarters—like an elevator—alone with him might be a colossal mistake.

Chapter 5

When they reached the elevator bay, Michael moved his hand from Jordis's back to push the down button. Although he no longer touched her, she could feel the ghost of his hand against her back. He didn't speak. He stood quietly at her side staring straight ahead. Jordis didn't speak either, too busy trying to make sense of the odd current that had passed between them back at her office. She thought about the look in his eyes when he'd caressed her face. He hadn't tried to kiss her, but she'd gotten the impression that he'd wanted to. But that was ridiculous, right? Michael Remington didn't do office romances. The talk around the office made that clear.

The elevator arrived and they stepped in together. Michael continued his silence. Jordis continued her silent musings about him. They'd only known each other for a few days. How on earth had he managed to get under her skin with no more than a few touches and a challenging look from those hypnotic grey eyes?

This could not be happening. She was not developing a thing for a guy at work...and a white guy at that. Was she out of her mind? Despite being in a predominantly white environment since her days at the all-girl college prep high school her mother had insisted she attend, she had never dated outside her race and now was certainly not the time to develop an appreciation for heavy cream with her coffee. A fling with a senior partner, even one—especially one—as sexy as Michael Remington, was definitely *not* in the cards. Nothing undermined a female lawyer's credibility in the office quicker than talk that she slept around with fellow associates. Carrying

on with a senior partner? That constituted premeditated reputation suicide, the quickest way for a woman to get herself labeled an opportunist set on sleeping her way to the top.

Jordis glanced over at Michael Remington.

As if sensing her pensive mood, he turned his head. "Something wrong?" His deep baritone voice reverberated within the steel box of the elevator.

"No."

"You're looking at me as if you want to ask me a question."

Yeah, like why does your skin look like you've been dipped in caramel? Or, better yet, what the hell just happened back there?

He'd been trying to intimidate her earlier or, at the very least, make her uncomfortable. Of that much, she felt certain. Then again, perhaps he had only been trying to make a point. After her "big girl" comment, he may have thought he could make her nervous about being caught alone in the office late at night. Give her something to think about.

If he'd been expecting her to cower or become a jittery ball of female nerves as a result of his efforts, he'd picked the wrong woman. While Jordis didn't take unnecessary chances, she'd stand her ground if the time came to defend herself. Attackers reacted to the smell of fear like sharks to blood in the water. She learned early in life the best defense against a bully: show no fear. People who made it clear they'd fight back made less appealing targets. She was definitely a fighter.

She shook her head in response to his question.

"No?" Michael slowly turned to face her. "Then perhaps there's something else on your mind?"

Jordis could tangibly feel the warmth pouring from his gaze. The look in his eyes made her

senses prickle with apprehension. He took a step in her direction as if propelled by a force outside himself. His movement caused a faint waft of his cologne to float through the elevator car. The woody scent drifted over her and that prickly feeling intensified.

Jordis took a measured step backwards.

Michael continued to advance and she continued a slow backstep until the wall of the elevator interrupted her retreat. Michael's eyes focused on her mouth. He reached for her and slid his thumb along her bottom lip. Jordis closed her eyes against the influx of arousal coursing through her veins. "Michael," she whispered before she opened her eyes, "this isn't a good idea."

"I know," he replied before he closed the distance between them and touched his mouth to hers.

Jordis stilled herself, bracing for a forceful, passionate kiss, but Michael took her mouth nice and slow. His lips were gentle, testing, searching. The unexpected tenderness melted her defenses. Unprepared for the sweetness of his mouth or the electricity of his fingertips brushing along her neck and jaw, she melted into him. When he slid his tongue along the seam of her lips, it felt like the most natural thing in the world for her to open to him and allow him to taste her own. He murmured softly in response. She heard a distance thud. He'd dropped their briefcases, but she didn't care. Her arms wrapped around his neck as if of their own accord and he took that as his invitation to take the embrace further and the kiss deeper.

The hand at her jawline slid down her neck and kept southbound until his palm slid inside her jacket and rubbed a beaded nipple through her blouse. Michael's other hand slid around her waist to rest at the small of her back. He pulled her hips tight against him. Heat pooled between Jordis's thighs and simmered under her skin. She had the sudden urge to remove her jacket...and

her blouse...and everything else to get some cool air on her skin. More importantly, she had the sudden urge to remove the jacket, shirt and—oh, yeah—just about everything else off Mr. Future Managing Partner to see if he looked half as good without his clothes as he did in them.

Michael must have been thinking along similar lines because a sudden breeze blew across her chest. He'd managed to undo the top two buttons of her blouse without her noticing his efforts. Where his hand played along the curve of breast displayed above her demi bra, her skin burned hot. Everywhere else, she had goose bumps.

She moaned. His manhood went from semi-erect to rock hard in zero point two seconds. He broke off from their kiss, emitting a sound between a growl and a groan, then transferred his touch from her breast to the wall above her head. The hand at her back slid to rest on the side of her waist. The relaxed hold removed her core from direct contact with his arousal, but she knew what state he was in. She'd felt the evidence of his virility the instant it rose.

Michael looked into her eyes. He seemed to be fighting some battle with himself. Jordis knew instinctively that she could stop everything happening between them with one word. Yet, that word wouldn't come to her lips. She stared into his eyes and realized a part of her really didn't want the encounter to stop.

* * *

Michael watched as Jordis's eye color shifted to a deep forest green and her pupils dilated. Her lips parted a half second later and the thoughts he'd been warring with fled his mind. He pressed himself against her, bending his knees slightly so that his shaft fit in that perfect spot between her thighs. He rested there a moment, relishing the feel of her against him. He wanted her desperately. The sexual chemistry between them sparked so intense it qualified as volatile,

but he wanted more from her than just sex. He wished he could absorb her through his skin until he knew her completely inside and out.

He'd watched her all week. Sharp and always on point when analyzing a legal issue, her intelligence made the outer package that much more attractive. She always appeared to be in a good mood, her behavior surprisingly courteous and polite to everyone including the support staff; he'd heard her greet a member of the janitorial staff by name last night. Yet, she accepted no foolishness or disrespect.

The interesting dichotomy of the woman fascinated him. Add to that her sensitivity in putting the needs of a down-on-her-luck single mom ahead of her drive to bill hours or whatever weekend plans she could have made and he was in a whole mess of trouble. He'd been drawn to her looks and legal acumen on a conscious level, but a connection this strong had to come from someplace deeper. How could he fight an attraction that was turning out to be so much more than physical, especially if he allowed his physical needs to dominate his interactions with her?

The voice of his mystery woman resounded in his head: *Something tells me that after tonight, we'd be hard pressed to rewind to getting-to-know-you drinks or dinner and a movie.* Perhaps she'd imparted a lesson he needed to heed. Wasn't he about to make the same mistake?

"*Jordis....?*" He sighed out her name in a half question.

They needed to downshift. He watched indecision flit through her eyes. Her hands went to his waist to steady herself. She wrapped a finger through the belt loops on either side of his pants. Her grasp shifted him slightly, causing his erection to rub against the *V* hiding her bud of desire. Jordis's eyes closed, a look of intense pleasure on her face. Her head fell back against the wall, and an odd sound squeezed from her throat as the elevator bounced to a stop with an

announcing ping.

Michael quickly stepped back from her. *Saved by the bell*, he thought. But who had been saved—her or him?

Jordis rebuttoned her blouse with fast, adept fingers. The elevator door slid open with a hydraulic groan, effectively quelling the mood inside the elevator. Michael picked up their briefcases and placed his hand against the retracted door, waiting for Jordis to exit. As he did so, his eyes strayed to a round black recessed globe in the upper right corner of the elevator. He did a double take. *Shit*.

Jordis moved past him without making eye contact and headed for the glass doors leading from the elevator bay.

The parking garage had that eerie orange glow that came from low wattage florescent light bouncing off grayish concrete walls, pillars and floors. Very little traffic cruised this part of the city this late at night so quiet hovered around them despite the garage's open access to the two-way street out front.

Stepping into the lowest level of the five-story parking structure, Michael scanned the parking garage and noticed a Dodge Charger SRT SuperBee in electric orange parked to his right. He allowed his eyes to glide over the racy sports car in appreciation before moving on to the silver Lexus SUV parked two spots closer. Michael headed for the Lexus, the only other vehicle visible inside the garage besides his full-size black Lincoln Navigator. The sound of Jordis's heels striking the concrete floor echoed through the garage, punctuating the noticeable lack of conversation between them.

When they reached the driver's side door of the Lexus, Michael turned towards her and

extended his hand. When she looked blankly at him, he said, "Keys?"

Without taking her eyes from his, Jordis reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out her keys. She leaned forward slightly, bypassing his outstretched hand, as if to unlocked the car door. Then her lips quirked as she turned the key fob towards the Charger and hit the automatic unlocked button.

When the Charger's lights blinked in concert with a pitched mechanical beep, Michael's eyes widened. "She's yours?"

"She?"

Michael shrugged. "With a body like that, every man on the planet would consider that Bee to be a woman." He'd driven the Navigator today instead of his Jag because the forecast had included a chance of snow. Even though he now drove a foreign sports car, he still loved a good ole American muscle car. In fact, he had a classic '69 Camaro that had been his father's at home in his four-car garage. Jordis's Bee was a thing a beauty. As he thought about it, it suited her right down to the vibrant color. It had sleek lines, strong curves, and lots of power under a pretty hood. He bet it drove like a dream.

A slow grin spread across Michael's face as he evaluated the Charger. When he turned back towards Jordis, the look she gave him made him hesitate. "What?"

"I...Nothing." Jordis headed for her car.

Michael watched her walk over to the Charger and open the door. He recognized the move as a blatant display of independence. He didn't know whether she did so as a matter of course or in response to what had transpired in the elevator.

He followed her, stepped up to the door, and leaned in to place her attaché on the passenger

seat. When he straightened, he studied her expression for a moment. His grey eyes searched her hazel ones as if he could decipher her hidden thoughts simply by peering into their depths. The contemplative look on her face made him sigh. "Look, Jordis, about what just happened..."

"Don't." She placed her hand against his chest.

A jolt of sexual tension hummed into him through her palm. She must have felt it too because she snatched her hand back almost immediately.

He looked down at the hand she now had balled into a fist. "We need to talk about it."

"No, we don't," she said. "We made a mistake. We both know it shouldn't have happened. You're my supervising attorney. It can't happen again. I know we both can agree on that so let's forget about it and move on." She moved to get in her car.

He stared at her for a few minutes, not sure it was that simple. He wanted to push the matter. More than a simple kiss had transpired between them. Pretending it hadn't happen didn't seem the way to go. Finally, he stepped aside so she could lower herself into the driver's seat, enjoying her skirt's rise up her thighs as she did so. "Fine. Do you have far to go?"

"No, I don't live far. I should be inside my apartment in about twenty minutes."

"Okay." Before he closed her door, he probed, "You don't need to stop for gas or anything, do you?"

"No, Michael. I'm good. I know better than to make pit stops alone this late at night."

"Good." He closed her door, but made a motion for her to roll down her window. "If you need anything, call me."

"What could I possibly need between here and home?" Her voice dripped with exasperation.

Her changing demeanor amused him. "You could run out of gas," he said for the simple sake

of argument.

"I told you I had plenty of gas."

"No. You told me you didn't need to *stop* for gas. For all I know, you're one of those people who like to ride around on *E*."

She looked at him with an expression that said *as if*.

Michael fought a smile. "You could get a flat tire."

"I have roadside assistance."

"Yeah, some strange guy in a tow truck meeting you stranded by the side of the road in the middle of the night. That really reassures me. Take my mobile number."

"Michael, really. I appreciate the escort to my car, but I'll be fine from here."

Michael's shoulders lifted as he heaved out an exaggerated sigh. He pulled his smartphone out of his inside jacket pocket. Punching buttons, he asked, "Do you have a cell phone?"

"Yes."

"What's the number?"

As she rattled off the numbers, he punched them into his keypad. A few seconds later, her phone began to ring inside her bag. Jordis frowned as if perplexed before she glanced over at the phone in his hand and saw that it had an active outgoing call.

Michael pushed the *End* button and slid his phone back into his pocket. "Now you have my number. Call me if you should need anything on the way home. If not, great. But, do call me when you get home so I know you arrived safely."

She started to open her mouth to protest, but Michael cut her off. She laughed. "Okay, okay," she said with a residual chuckle, unable to avoid seeing the humor in the situation. "I'll call you

to let you know I made it home." She started the car. "Goodnight, Michael."

"Goodnight, Jordis."

* * *

Michael stood watching Jordis maneuver out of the parking garage. When she cleared the gate, he dropped his head back, closed his eyes and let out a big sigh. What the hell was he doing? All he had to do was walk her to her car and say goodnight. Instead, he'd made out with her in an elevator and then harped about her safety as if he were dropping off a date.

Turning toward his SUV, he pulled out his key ring and hit the remote unlock button. The SUV's lights blinked at him as the keyless entry system chirped. Michael walked over slowly, pondering the fact that he had given Jordis his mobile number. He took great care to make sure very few people had his mobile number. It avoided problems, especially those of the female variety. Only Chase, his legal assistant, and a few key senior partners had his personal cell number. If anyone else needed to reach him, they could leave him a voicemail message at the office—he picked those up religiously—or contact his assistant who always knew how to get in touch with him.

He found it ironic that women tried so hard to get his personal number and the one time he offered it willingly to a female associate, she didn't want it. He felt almost insulted...almost. Instinctively, he suspected that with Jordis it came down to a show of independence. She'd obviously been perturbed by his show of old world manners. He'd caught her look of surprise when he'd helped her don her jacket. That bit with her car keys—not letting him open the door for her—had been even more telling. As he slid into his ride, a small smile crossed his lips. She'd probably made a lot of men cringe with that look she'd given him. He'd found it amusing, though

he'd been careful not to let her see his amusement. He didn't think that would have gone over so well.

Michael slipped his key into the ignition, but didn't start the car. He glanced over at the elevator bay, pulled out his phone and made a call. When he finished, he leaned back and ran a hand over his face. The scene in Jordis's office flashed through his mind. He'd almost kissed her then. He hadn't planned to. When he'd touched her in the doorway, he wanted only to challenge her bravado a bit. Once his hand contacted her warm skin, however, all conscience thought had fled. All he could think about was how soft her skin felt, how beautiful her eyes were, and how much he wanted to taste her full pouty lips.

He'd watched her eyes shift colors like they had in the conference room when she'd caught him staring at her legs. The vein in her neck had pulsed at Mach speed and he'd wondered if anxiety or attraction fueled the response. She didn't seem the anxious type. Given her response to him in the elevator, he'd like to think that it had been attraction. Yet, when he and Chase had walked past her office after Monday's meeting, he'd heard Vivian ask her about her sexual preferences. Her nondescript response left questions to which he'd like to know the answers. It would be his luck that she was indeed gay. Then again, that would solve his problem, right? After all, if she wasn't heterosexual, then his attraction to her didn't matter. Their relationship wasn't going anywhere.

A sudden gush of disappointment skittered across his gut, making him grab the steering wheel and squeeze tightly. Shaking off the implications of his reaction, he chastised himself. *Get a grip, Remington. There's no way she would have responded to you that way if she were gay.* The sound of her moan when she'd pulled him against her center had sent a shiver down his

spine. Even now, the sound haunted him. His still semi-firm erection twitched with a need for release that could only be found between her thighs.

He swore out loud. Chase had called it. Jordis Morgan shook him up in ways a colleague—or any woman for that matter—hadn't in years. Until his midnight run-in with the mystery woman a couple of weeks ago, he couldn't remember experiencing an instant emotional draw to a woman. Instant sexual attraction? Sure. He'd been there and done that. He handled instant biological urges easy. He did what came naturally and forgot about it, and the woman, once he'd slated his need. Unfortunately, he sensed what he felt for Jordis went beyond mere biological appetency and therein lied the problem.

Why on earth did the first time he felt these stirrings have to be for a woman at his firm? He knew the dangers of that. He could be setting himself up for a possible shake down. What would she want? Would she maneuver for key case assignments or guaranteed partnership or a more permanent setup, perhaps one that came with eighteen-plus years of child support payments? He'd certainly been there before. He shook his head. She came across as a straight shooter. She didn't seem the type to play games, but he had to wonder with which head he'd formed that opinion.

Of course, the little question of whether she “did white guys” had yet to be answered. He hadn't been able to stick around long enough to hear if Vivian had gotten any additional information on that query. Wondering if she had a racial preference didn't disturb him as much. For a competitive guy like himself, this second hurdle, if it existed, didn't seem insurmountable. He wouldn't mind being Ms. Morgan's first. She certainly hadn't responded to his kiss as if she'd been concerned about anything but the feel of his tongue inside her mouth.

An unconscious smile curved his lips. The contradiction of not wanting to develop a personal relationship with a woman at work and pondering initiating Jordis Morgan into the possibilities of an interracial affair were lost on the usually acute lawyer.

He leaned forward and started his car. The dashboard lit up and displayed that over twenty minutes had passed since he'd said goodbye to Jordis and, of course, she hadn't called. He wondered which would explode first, their battle of wills or the sexual time bomb they'd ignited with that kiss in the elevator. Whatever happened, he doubted either one of them was going to be able to "just forget" about what happened between them tonight.

Chapter 6

Jordis strolled into her Northland loft apartment twenty minutes after leaving the office parking garage. She walked over to close the vertical blinds covering the floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding glass door that led to the patio deck at the back of the building. She had a great view overlooking the large residence swimming pool that was backed by a walking trail. Lights usually lit the pool, throwing a glow into the apartment through the glass doorway. Tonight nothing but darkness poured in because the pool had closed for the winter.

She flicked on the lights and headed for the refrigerator to get a cold drink of water. Her phone rang. Jordis rushed over to the entryway where her bag lay abandoned and fished out her cell phone. She looked at the number on the screen and smiled. "Hey, you. To what do I owe this late night call?"

"Hey, sis," her brother replied. "Just checking on my favorite girl."

"Ha. Ha. That must mean you're in between girlfriends at the moment or you would definitely be otherwise occupied this time of night."

Her brother laughed.

"Well, for someone complaining about the lateness of the hour, you sound awfully bright eyed and bushy tailed."

"Yeah, well, I'm just getting in from the office."

"What! Jo, what have I told you about keeping such late hours. I don't like you alone in that

office building so late after business hours."

Jordis rolled her eyes and plopped down on her plush oversized chocolate brown sofa. *Here we go again*, she thought. "Look, dude, you're not the boss of me," she joked, reverting to their childhood banter. "A girl has to make a living."

"That's crap and you know it. A girl can always bring her work home with her and do it from the safety of her own apartment. Isn't your laptop working?"

Jordis thought about the laptop her brother had recently overhauled for her. It had been top of the line when she bought it six months ago. Now, she wouldn't be surprised if the U.S. military considered it a classified secret weapon with all the RAM, and microchips, and whatzits he'd added to it. An electrical engineer by training, her brother spent most of his time tinkering with anything electronic or mechanical, trying to see what he could do to "make it *purr*". He'd been a Bond fan as a kid. Jordis had always thought that if MI6 ever needed a hip quartermaster, her brother would be the perfect candidate. If he weren't such a looker, he'd be considered the quintessential nerd.

"My laptop is fine. Although, I'm afraid to turn it on now. Last time I went to use it, it tried to take over a small country in the Middle East."

"Ha, ha. Very funny," her brother replied dryly. "I'm serious, sis. What's the point of having remote access to your office network if you're going to stay at the office no matter what? Hell, what you need is a man. Then you'd have something to do besides play Perry Mason and perfect oral arguments."

Jordis signed. "I need another man like I need a hole in the head. The last one I had didn't know the meaning of the word *supportive* and considered the things he did for me as down

payments on the right to control me. No, thanks! Besides, there's nothing a man can do for me that I can't do for myself."

"Your former fiancé was an idiot. And, there is *one* thing a man can do that you can't do for yourself." He paused. "No matter how many batteries you buy."

Jordis could hear the laughter in his voice. "Ha, ha. *Now* who's trying to be funny?" She flashed back to the feel of Michael Remington's generous erection rubbing against her sweet spot and, though she'd never admit it, knew her brother was oh so right.

"Look, I know I sound like a broken record, but just because you're not in L.A. anymore doesn't mean you don't have to be careful. Even here in the Midwest we have our crazies and lowlifes."

"Brandt, you don't have to worry. I wasn't alone. My boss was still at the office tonight and he made sure I left when he did." She left out the part about not knowing Michael was there at the time. Her brother didn't need to know that part. "In fact, he insisted on walking me to my car and made sure I left the garage in one piece."

Jordis's phone beeped with an incoming call. She looked at the screen.

"Oh, *crud!*"

"What's the matter?"

"That's my boss beeping in. He made me promise to call and let him know when I made it home and I forgot."

"Good for him."

Jordis rolled her eyes again. "Whatever. Look, bro, I gotta go. Talk to you tomorrow."

With that, she clicked over to the other line. "Hello."

A deep voice drawled, "Well, hello, Ms. Morgan. I trust that you are safe and sound at home and not stranded somewhere on the side of the road?"

A shiver tingled along her spine. He had an über sexy phone voice. "Yes, I'm home. I'm sorry. I really did mean to call you, but my brother called as I walked in the door and we got to talking and it sort of slipped my mind."

"Okay then. I just wanted to make sure you were fine before I turned in for the night."

"Thanks for checking on me."

"You're welcome."

Before he could hang up, she rushed on, "Michael?"

"Yes?"

"Look, I know I was short with you in the garage." She took a deep breath. "I apologize. I realize that you were only trying to make sure that I got home safely. I want you to know, that despite my behavior, I do appreciate it."

"No problem."

Jordis sighed silently when he chose not to bring up the events leading up to her becoming short with him.

"You know, Jordis, we do have remote access to the network available. I'll have Technology set you up tomorrow. You really shouldn't be alone at the office that late."

Jordis sat down on the couch. "Here we go again."

"Excuse me?"

"Michael, I'm really not in the mood for this lecture again tonight."

"Again?" Her reply confused him.

“Yes. I just got the whole you-know-you-shouldn’t-be-at-the-office-this-late and the why-don’t-you-just-use-remote-access speech from my brother.”

“Ah. I understand. Big brother’s protective of you.”

“Actually, he’s my younger brother...by four years. A fact he seems to keep forgetting.”

“He’s not forgetting. It simply doesn’t matter. He’s a man and you’re his sister. It sounds like the two of you are close, which means he considers it his job to protect you and make sure you’re taken care of.”

“Is that just the macho in you or are you speaking from personal experience as a sibling?”

Jordis heard what sounded like a loud thunk as Michael’s deep laugh rang through the phone. She’d never heard him laugh before.

“‘Macho in me’, huh? So, you think I’m macho?”

“Oh, in the worst way.”

Residual chuckles tampered off as he continued, “Well, I don’t know about that, but I do have two sisters. One’s older and the other is younger than me, but I don’t think I treat either of them differently because of our birth order.” Jordis heard him take a sip of something. “I’d certainly chastise them if I found out they were hanging out at their offices late into the night with no one around but a few security guards.”

Jordis got up and strolled into her bedroom while he talked. She left the lights off and used the light from the hallway to see by. She pulled off her skirt, laid it neatly over an overstuffed chair, and unbuttoned her blouse before plopping herself on her queen-sized bed. She lay on her back, with her head at the foot of the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling with one foot flat on the bed and the other dangling in the air at the end of her crossed leg. The fingers of her free hand

absently caressed her abdomen as she continued her conversation with Michael.

"So, what you're saying is that because I wasn't born with a Y chromosome, you feel I need you or my brother...or some man...to protect and take care of me."

"No. What I'm saying is that because I was born with a Y chromosome, it's my nature to want to protect and take care of the women in my life whether you actually need me to or not. It sounds as if your brother is cut from the same cloth."

A long silence followed his comment. Jordis felt a slight rush of excitement at his use of the word *you*. Part of her understood that he spoke rhetorically, but something inside her liked the idea that he could consider her amongst the women entitled to his protection.

"You still there?" Michael asked.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Well? No comment?"

What could she say to that? He hadn't spouted the usual male propaganda about women being the weaker sex or no matter what advances women have made in the workplace, it's still primarily the man's job to bring home the bacon. Because his argument wasn't based upon finding her somehow lacking or less capable than him, Jordis really didn't have a retort.

"Well, I guess if that's who you're telling me you are, there's really not much for me to say. But...how do your sisters feel about that?"

He sat quietly a moment before admitting, "Pretty much the way you seem to feel about your brother's attitude."

They fell into an easy conversational flow from there. He told her a little more about his sisters. His voice rolled across her. She loved the sound of his voice, deep and smooth like one of

those late night radio announcers who played only love songs.

Jordis hit the speakerphone button on her phone and turned up the in-speaker volume. Laying the phone on the bed beside her head, she continued the discussion in hands-free mode. With his voice echoing through the darkened bedroom, she felt almost as if he were in the room with her. The resonant sound of his voice caused her nipples to bead. Unconsciously, her hand moved up to rub against a nodule plumped under her satin black bra. The sexy tickle made her wish for his hands to take over. She took a deep breath trying to control a tension she hadn't meant to rouse.

"You okay over there?"

Michael's question startled her. A momentary fear that he knew exactly what she was doing assaulted her.

"You aren't falling asleep on me are you?"

She could hear the humor in his voice and immediately relaxed. "Of course not," she replied in the same tone. Without thinking, she added, "What woman could ever fall asleep on a man as enthralling as you?"

Almost as soon as the comment left her mouth, she realized the implications that could be taken from what she intended as a joke. Luckily, Michael didn't seem to take it the wrong way. He simply called her on being a smartass and continued with their chat. He asked and she answered a few questions about what had drawn her back to the Kansas City area from L.A. Although she answered his questions easily enough, explaining the city's proximity to her brother as one of the key selling points, she wondered if he sensed she was holding something back.

After a while, Michael said, "It's late. I better let you get some rest. Something tells me you

like to get into the office early."

Jordis glanced over at her digital clock, which glowed one fifteen in red. They'd been talking for almost an hour and she hadn't felt the passage of time.

"Yes, I'd better go. I have a deposition first thing in the morning."

"Ok, I'll see you at the office."

They both hesitated a second before hanging up at the same time. Jordis laid in the dark for a while contemplating why she felt like a teenager who had gotten the star quarterback of the football team to call her.

* * *

Jordis slept fitfully that night. The recurring dream she'd thought done slipped into her consciousness. The gladiator came to her. His hands exploring and pressing until an exquisite pressure behind her pubic bone made her moan in her sleep. Her buttocks ground into rumpled black Egyptian cotton. The top sheet slid languorously against her thighs. The sensuous friction heightened her senses. Dampness pooled along the intimate folds of her womanhood, bare beneath a flimsy white silk negligee due to her aversion to the binding feel of panties during slumber.

This time she didn't stop his touching, letting him explore her intimately. His fingers slid inside her. Her hips lifted, wanting more. He kissed her. His tongue danced inside her mouth. The thought of what that tongue might accomplish against lower parts of her anatomy taunted her until intense heat burned inside her flesh, causing her to kick off the tousled sheets. Jordis's negligee rucked up to her hips; legs gaped open. Her bare buttocks pressed harder into the mattress and even in sleep, her pelvis began to tuck and release in an erotic rhythm generally

shared by two. Her REM mind fixated on him, that beautifully bronzed and intoxicatingly muscled stranger. She wanted him deeper than his fingers would allow.

A whimper pierced her sleep state. Jordis began to float towards consciousness, but the dream gripped her tightly and lulled her back down. She almost tangibly felt a fullness between her legs. In her dream, a slow methodic rocking bounced her gently against the wall. Her body rode up then down along beige flat paint in a staccato rhythm punctuated by loud breaths and soft groans. Her grip tightened on the gladiator's hips and she rocked him back. The tempo began to build and she urged him harder, then faster. So close. So close, she thought, pulling him tighter against her. Then it came, an explosion of pleasure so intense a real life mewl of satisfaction escaped her lips and startled her eyes awake.

Jordis lay staring up at the ceiling wide-eyed and panting. She'd heard his voice call her name in her sleep. Only this time, she knew that voice and when he looked into her eyes, the once amorphous, indescribable eye color was gray. The gladiator's eyes were unmistakably gray.

She squeezed her damp and sticky thighs together. She'd come in her sleep. Yet, somehow, the edge wasn't completely off. She lingered in a state of semi-arousal. She had the mechanical means in the bedside table drawer to relieve her discomfiture, but she wouldn't go there. She couldn't go there, because the face she'd seen in her sleep was...*Michael Remington's!*

"No," she complained audibly to no one in particular, but hoped the universe and her uncooperative subconscious would hear and heed.

No way she could embrace a sexual fantasy about her boss. She'd be hard pressed to be in a room with him ever again without thinking about the naughtiness of it all.

Jordis rolled over onto her stomach, pulled a pillow over her head and groaned. She hadn't

had the gladiator dream in days. She'd had it almost daily for a straight week after New Year's. Her midnight rendezvous with the costumed Lothario had played over and over, night after night, as clear as a high definition movie. Somehow, in this morning's version, her anonymous suitor—previously safe fodder for fantasies of illicit sex—had morphed into Mr. Macho and she didn't even want to begin to analyze the Freudian implications of that.

Ugh!! He had ruined a perfectly good dream. Now, she wouldn't be able to separate her gladiator fantasies from the olive-skinned gray-eyed counselor.

His voice had rolled over her like a sensuous massage. The deep tone had aroused her as much as the naughty imagery conjured by her dreaming mind. Surely, he'd crept into her fantasy only because his nectarious voice had been the last sound she'd heard before going to sleep last night. Nothing more to it than that, she hoped.

But, even as she rationalized the unease caused by the provocative dream, the glutinous feeling between her thighs told another story. She had never reached physical fulfillment during her previous dreams about the gladiator. That she had done so this morning implied a burgeoning attraction for the svelte partner she'd been loathed to examine heretofore. In fact, she didn't want to analyze the *how comes* and *what fors* or anything else about the situation even now. Nothing good could come of it. Her goal was partnership, her focus billable hours and finding a way, other than sleeping with Remington, to get appointed to the Metra Pharmaceuticals case. She needed to execute a serious display of mind over matter or, more aptly, mind over *libido*. Like their elevator tryst from the night before, Jordis intended—no, she needed—to put this and him out of her mind.

Determined to do exactly that, she rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

* * *

Across town, Michael slept with morning wood to rival the trunk of a hundred year old redwood. Her moans were haunting him in his sleep. Juliet. Luscious breasts pressed against his bare chest and her tanned skin looked good enough to eat. He pressed his lips against her throat and in his dream, she emitted that sound that made him go hard as concrete. His fingers were under her dress. They caressed her intimate folds with a steady rhythm. Feminine sounds of pleasure coaxed a tumescence he yearned to push deep inside her instead. He looked into her eyes. This time the mask did little to distract from their color. They were hazel, a beautiful kaleidoscope hazel. She stared back at him and parted her legs, the invitation too much to ignore.

For the first time, the Sandman took pity on him and allowed him to remove his fingers and position his body to consummate his desire. The dream Juliet grabbed his hips and pulled him to her. He tucked his face into the curve of her neck and slid home. He dipped in and out of her wetness in a steady rhythm until he felt her spasm around him, those en rêve orgasmic pulses taking him right to the edge.

When she cried out her release, he looked up into her face and the mask had vanished. "Jordis," he shouted in the temporal world, his soporific haze shattered.

Breathing hard, Michael came awake disoriented and on edge. As his dream came back to him, he sat up on the edge of the bed, placed his elbows on his knees and dropped his head in surrender. Even his subconscious mind wanted her. Looking down at his lap, he rose and headed for the bathroom.

Michael stood under the shower spray with his head down. Warm water sluiced through his hair and down his body. His hands pressed hard against the wall, frustration pouring off him in

waves. He'd grabbed and squeezed hard on the base of his shaft as he'd shouted himself awake this morning, but it'd been to no avail. He'd ejaculated all over himself.

He hadn't had a wet dream since his teen years and having one today didn't please him in the least. The combination of his encounter with his mystery woman superimposed over his encounter last night with Jordis had been too much for him to handle.

He ran a hand through his hair and lifted his face into the water. Was he truly losing all self-control? Those exotic eyes of Jordis's—that seemed to shifted color with the light, her wardrobe, and her emotions—were haunting him. He didn't understand it. He'd dated plenty of women with beautiful eyes. One woman in particular had eyes with such a unique blend of blue and purple that they were almost violet. Even so, he didn't remember *those* eyes turning him inside out or tripping into his dreams until he practically pleased himself in his sleep. As the dream played over in his head, he groaned. Ms. Morgan had gone from simply screwing with his concentration to affecting his ability to sleep.

He reached over and pumped two squirts of shampoo into his palm. He rubbed his hands together and then ran them through his hair. A slide show played in his mind as he worked his hair into a lather. *Juliet. Jordis. Jordis. Juliet.* What was it about these two women that appealed to him on such an intense level?

He remembered his confusion over Juliet's eye color. He'd been perplexed about whether they were green or they were amber. He hadn't thought much about it after he'd realized he'd met two different Juliets that night. Although, part of him had wondered how he could have confused amber eyes with green ones, even with being a few sheets to the wind. After meeting Jordis, he didn't feel like such an idiot. Her chameleon eyes covered that color spectrum at various times of

the day.

He paused at the thought. Could Juliet's eyes have been hazel? An odd tremor rolled through him as the guttural sound of pleasure Jordis had made in the elevator last night replayed in his head. It had been familiar. Was there a reason Juliet and Jordis had merged in his dream? There were some similarities between the women when he thought about it. Juliet had been nicely tan, but Jordis with her golden toffee skin was actually quite close in skin tone. In truth, their coloring had been very similar, right down to the color of their hair. Surely....

Shampoo began to run down his face, snapping him out of his ridiculous train of thought. He rinsed his hair. The women couldn't be the same person. Jordis was noticeably taller than Juliet. Because his encounter with Juliet had been shrouded in dimness, Jordis's features were currently more distinct to him, which was probably why he had fixated on Jordis. He was compensating for not being able to find the mystery woman, a simple case of transference. Jordis served as a temporary substitute for something—someone—out of his reach. But Jordis was off limits.

Maybe if he concentrated on finding the mystery woman, his attraction to Jordis would wane. He would talk to Chase again today about renewing the search for the mystery woman. Chase said he had talked to everyone in attendance that night, but Chase had to have missed something. They should check with all the invitees, not only the ones who had RSVP'd in the affirmative or whom Chase had personally seen at the party. They'd missed someone with answers, and he intended to find that someone so he could put himself out of his misery.

Confident in his transference theory and feeling better that his inexplicable instant attraction to Jordis wasn't so inexplicable. He slathered in some leave-in conditioner then washed his body with his favorite scented body shampoo. By the time he completed dressing and headed to work,

he felt at peace with the whole Jordis situation. So as not to tempt fate, however, he decided he would avoid Ms. Morgan today. He had a boatload of work to do, no sense pushing his self-control unnecessarily.

Later that day, Michael had been back at his desk only a few minutes—after his fifth straight two-hour workout of the week—when his mobile phone vibrated the receipt of a text message. He'd stayed away from Jordis today, but she'd still managed to slip into his thoughts. His relaxed demeanor of the morning had been gone by lunchtime. By two o'clock, he'd needed a serious testosterone detox.

He looked down at his phone. A text from his younger sister Raina queried whether he wanted to join her for dinner on the Plaza. Michael smiled to himself. As a junior in college, Raina rarely had any money and when she did, it went exclusively towards her wardrobe. What she really meant was did he want to *buy* her dinner and since she had selected the Country Club Plaza, she likely counted on dining at a really nice restaurant.

He typed, Sure. Ur treat?

He laughed out loud at her response: *ABSOLUTELY!!! Mickey Ds ok? :D.*

After texting Raina his acceptance of her dinner invitation and telling her to meet him by the Bronze Boar statue on West Forty-Seventh Street, Michael dove into his work with a much lighter attitude. He was looking forward to having dinner with his sister. He couldn't be around her unpredictable energy and stay in a mood for long. She was just what he needed to keep his mind off a certain leggy lawyer.

Chapter 7

Jordis's mood soared with positive energy that mirrored the beautiful winter sunshine. She'd had a productive day at work. The deposition she'd taken today had gone her way. The corporate executive deposed by her confirmed facts that proved his company knew about her client's small start-up athletic company before the corporate giant had launched a national advertising campaign around a logo so similar to her client's federally registered trademark as to cause confusion in the marketplace. Jordis expected to receive a nice settlement offer from opposing counsel sometime next week.

On top of that, she'd managed to avoid Michael Remington today. The deposition had taken up most of the day and when it was over, Michael Remington had been in meetings of his own. Jordis had made it a point to leave the office early. She didn't want to be sitting in her office when he left for the day. If he'd come strolling by and found her there, he'd have insisted on escorting her to her car. The last thing she needed was to be alone with him again—in her office, in an elevator, or anywhere else—so soon. She still hadn't come to grips with his appearance in her dream. Whenever she'd had a moment of respite today, her mind had drifted to him, alternating between their encounter in the elevator last night and her erotic dream from this morning. It was unnerving.

She chose to use her early exodus as an opportunity to visit her favorite bookstore on the Plaza. One of the last of a dying breed, the humongous Barnes & Noble on West 47th Street

carried the largest collection of print books in the city and housed a café. With a mind happily engaged in her favorite pastime, she browsed the new releases and checked out the employee recommendations shelves.

After about an hour of moseying around, picking up a selection here and there and reading back covers, Jordis decided to buy something that would totally engross her, but wouldn't contain any romantic underpinnings. She opted for a thousand-plus page horror thriller about a small town that gets sealed off from the rest of the world by an invisible dome impenetrable even by air. The novel had been out for a while, but she hadn't had time to read it. She managed to snag a hard cover copy of the book off the clearance table, which thrilled her. Sliding her literary prize into her reusable book tote on top of several other books she had purchased, Jordis stepped out of the mega bookstore with a buoyant step and nearly collided with a laughing twenty-something hanging on the arm of . . . *Michael Remington*? When her eyes met his, the look of surprise on his face mirrored her own.

"Excuse me," the twenty-something said. "I wasn't paying attention." She smiled at Jordis.

Taken aback by the encounter, Jordis deftly covered her shock and smiled back at the girl. "That's okay."

The young lady was quite beautiful. Long naturally curly coffee brown hair hung loose about her shoulders. The fall of hair framed a heart-shaped face from which peered laughing gray eyes. Jordis looked up at Michael. The young lady's eyes matched his shade almost exactly.

"Jordis," Michael said with a nod. "What are you doing here?"

Jordis kept her smile going for him, trying to mask her unease at having been thwarted in her attempt to avoid him for a full day. He'd dressed in black jeans and a black T-shirt, but the

casual attire in no way detracted from his over all appeal. She lifted her book tote. “Gathering some new reading material by my favorite authors and enjoying the last few days of the Plaza Christmas lights. Some of us do actually get out of the office at a decent hour from time to time.” Hiding behind sarcasm, Jordis added with a pointed look, “The question is what are you doing out at only...,” she glanced at her watch, “oh my, six fifteen on a work night?”

Michael couldn't stop the half lifting of his lips when she made a fake gasp of surprise while checking the time.

“You two obviously know each other,” the twenty-something said, looking back and forth between them.

“Yeah, we know each other,” Michael replied. “Raina meet Jordis Morgan. Jordis, this is my sister Raina.”

That would explain the matching gray eyes. Raina didn't have her brother's olive coloring, however. She had fair skin.

“Nice to meet you,” Jordis said, holding out her hand.

Raina shook her hand. “Likewise.”

Continuing to look between Michael and Jordis with an inquisitive stare, Raina asked, “Sooo, how do you two know each other?”

“Jordis works with me at the firm.”

“You're a lawyer?” Raina, blessed with the unshackled honesty of the young and the not-yet-jaded, didn't even attempt to mask her surprise.

The doubtful look on Raina's face gave Jordis pause. “Um, yes,” Jordis replied. “Is that a problem?”

“No, but,” Raina looked her up and down, “you sure you work a my brother’s firm?”

Jordis looked over at Michael, who could no longer conceal his grin.

Michael gave a smile at the priceless look on her face. Michael knew what his clotheshorse of a sister was thinking. The fashion diva in Raina coveted the outfit Jordis had on. It wouldn’t exactly fit in at RHF. The lady’s personal flair appeared to equal her professional chic, although the two personas were on opposite ends of the fashion spectrum.

Beneath her open long winter coat, Jordis wore a short black jean skirt with brocaded pockets and seams over black opaque tights that disappeared into black knee-high genuine patent leather spiked-heel boots. A silver chain with several charms attached looped around the right boot at ankle level. A cropped, baggy loose cable knit sweater in coral layered over a shiny silver long-sleeved tee that showed through the holes in the sweater. Medium-sized silver hoop earrings dangled from her ears, each with two bangles looped together so that they revolved slightly when Jordis moved her head. A high ponytail rode the back of her head, making her sculpted cheekbones stand out against her oval face. A few loose chestnut brown tendrils fell about her temples and gave the hairstyle a feminine edge. She looked like she’d stepped off a runway or the pages of a magazine.

“You certainly don’t dress like any of the lawyers I’ve ever met from my brother’s firm.”

Jordis laughed, “Well, I don’t get to dress this cool in the office. I try to tone it down a bit so they all think I’m as straight-laced as they are.”

Raina laughed. “I like her,” she said to her brother.

Yeah, I like her, too, Michael thought. *Maybe a little too much.* He glanced back down at those boots. They were anything but straight-laced and they were conjuring up visions of whips,

chains and leather bustiers over lace teddies. Not that he had ever been into that sort of thing, but he suddenly had an inkling of the possible appeal.

“So, have you had dinner yet?” Raina asked Jordis.

“No, I was about to grab something and head home.”

“Why don’t you join us? We were in the process of deciding where to eat.”

Jordis glanced at Michael who looked not only surprised by his sister’s invitation, but also a little uncomfortable. She suspected he didn’t fraternize with his associates outside of the office. He didn’t even socialize with them in the office. She’d take the hint and put him quickly out of his misery.

“Thanks, for the offer, Raina, but I wouldn’t want to intrude on your evening. It was nice—“

“Don’t be silly. You wouldn’t be intruding. Would she Michael?” Raina looked up at her brother expectantly.

“No, of course not,” he replied, with a slight edge to his voice that made him sound less than sincere.

“Besides,” Raina explained in a mock whisper, “you’ll help keep me sane. I love my brother, but sometimes he can be a bit grumpy.”

“Hey, you do remember who’s paying for dinner tonight, right?” Michael reminded her with a frown.

Raina grabbed him around the waist and hugged him from the side. “Why you are, brother mine,” she said sweetly, batting her eyelashes at him. “You wouldn’t begrudge me a decent meal because I speak the truth now would you?”

Michael shook his head. Jordis watched him fight a smile. The siblings were obviously close.

Raina had her big brother wrapped firmly around her little finger and she knew it.

“You know you haven’t exactly been the best of company lately. Ever since New Year’s Eve —“

“*Raina*,” he interrupted in a stern voice.

“What happened New Year’s Eve?” Jordis asked, looking between them.

“Nothing,” Michael interjected. His clipped tone left no doubt he considered the line of questioning closed. “How about we head to a restaurant so we don’t have to wait in line all night for a table?”

Michael removed Jordis’s bag of books from her hand and shouldered them himself. “Steakhouse ok with everyone?”

Michael and Jordis both looked at Raina. She shrugged. “It’s good with me unless Jordis would rather have seafood.”

“Nope. Steakhouse works fine for me.”

Raina hooked her arm through her brother’s and Jordis fell in at his other side as they headed towards the *Plaza III* restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue. They meandered a few blocks west of the bookstore and then headed south. Once the threesome reached the restaurant, they were seated quickly at a nice U-shaped booth next to a window overlooking the sidewalk. Raina slid into the center of the U. Michael and Jordis took positions on the wings, sitting opposite each other.

Jordis glanced out the window behind Michael's head. She loved to people watch and her position gave her a great view of others out enjoying the beautiful Plaza backdrop. Michael grabbed Jordis’s attention when he asked what she wanted to order. Looking up to find a

waitress with pen poised over order pad, Jordis quickly gave her order of pan-fried crab cakes with jalapeño corn relish appetizer and entree of teriyaki marinated jumbo shrimp with tenderloin brochette.

* * *

Michael tried not to be moved by her smile. He wasn't succeeding. He couldn't believe he'd spent all day avoiding her and accepted a dinner invitation from his sister to get his mind off her only to end up across the dinner table from her. Someone upstairs must have a sick sense of humor.

"Tell me about those boots," Raina said. "And where can I get a pair just like them?"

"You can't." Jordis shifted her attention to Raina. "I got these in L.A. at a little boutique on the Santa Monica Promenade. The owner is a friend of mine. She specializes in finding unique fashions that she imports in small quantities from all over the world. Her intent is that when her customers shop at her store, they know they aren't going to run into a dozen or more ladies in the city wearing the same thing. These boots she discovered somewhere in Europe. She refuses to say where, even to me. What she did tell me was that when she saw them, she immediately thought of me and she acquired only one pair—in my size."

"Cool. They must have cost a fortune."

"Actually, they didn't cost me a dime. Lindsay gave them to me last year as a birthday present."

"Wow. I wish I had friends like that." Raina took a sip of her lemonade, and then gave Jordis a speculative look. "What size shoe do you wear?"

"Don't even think about it," Jordis deadpanned, even though she wanted to laugh.

Michael chuckled as he watched his sister pout. "My sister fancies herself a budding designer. She's been addicted to clothes since the age of three when mom let her pick out her own outfit for the first time," Michael said to Jordis.

"Do you study fashion design now?" Jordis asked Raina.

The food arrived at that moment. Raina waited for their meals to be served before she responded.

"I'm studying at the art institute at the moment. I need to improve my drawing skills and work with textures some more. I really want to be able to draw my own creations, not simply come up with ideas that I pay someone else to draw."

"That sounds like a wise decision then."

Raina and Jordis chatted for a while about Raina's studies, fashion and art. Raina got excited when Jordis mentioned she had a cousin in Los Angeles who ran her own fashion house.

After a while Jordis looked over at him. Perhaps realizing he hadn't said much. He quietly looked back at her. A beer bottle with his hand wrapped around it sat on the table in front of him.

"Raina, I think we're boring your brother."

"Nah. Trust me." Raina looked over at Michael. "If he were bored, he'd *definitely* say something."

The corner of Michael's mouth turned up in a half smile. Jordis's eyes shifted and she twisted her left wrist a couple of times out of habit before she rubbed it absently.

"Is that right?" Jordis said still looking at Michael.

Michael didn't respond. He lifted his beer and took a long slow drink as he watched her over the bottle.

After a moment, Jordis heard Raina add, "Besides, my brother is never bored when he has a beautiful woman to look at it."

Jordis's eyes narrowed. Her gaze shifted to Raina when she sensed the young lady settle back into her chair. Raina glanced between Michael and Jordis a few times. Michael could see the wheels spinning behind those gray eyes so much like his own. She was getting the wrong idea about him and Jordis. He would have to set her straight when he got her alone again. He didn't need her speculating to their older sister or, heaven forbid, mom about what was going on between the two lawyers—which was a definite *nothing*. Okay, so maybe parts of him wanted something to be going on between them, but the parts above his waist were determined to keep the lower parts from getting their way.

About the time Michael was getting uncomfortable under his sister's perusal, a commotion at the front of the restaurant drew Raina's attention.

A group of six young men entered the restaurant. As they passed Jordis's table, a jeans-wearing young man with shaggy blonde hair and big brown eyes looked over at Raina and winked. Michael caught Raina's reserved smile as she tried to act nonchalant about what had occurred.

"Who's that?" Michael asked his sister.

Raina flinched, reaching for her drink to cover her reaction.

"Raina?"

"What?" she answered in an irritated voice.

"Who was that guy who winked at you?"

"No one."

“No one, huh?” Michael took a sip of his beer. “That’s why he keeps looking over here every chance he gets. If he keeps that up, the boy’s going to have a crook in his neck by the time he gets his meal.”

Raina huffed out a breath. “Leave him alone, Michael. It’s just a guy I know.”

“Know from where?”

“No where in particular.”

“I see,” Michael said, a slow tick beginning to pulse in his jaw. “No one, from no where in particular. Sounds like a guy I should get to know since he’s so interested in my sister.”

Michael put his beer down as if he were about to rise. Raina shot a hand out to grab his forearm.

“Don’t you dare!”

“Then start talking.”

Raina glanced over at Jordis.

“What are you looking at her for? She can’t help you.”

Raina looked embarrassed by his words and heavy-handed tactics, but he didn’t care. Their father had died when Raina was in middle school and Michael had always felt it his responsibility to be the protector their father didn’t get the chance to be.

“Raina, I know what it’s like to have an overprotective brother meddling in your love life.” Jordis placed her hand over Raina’s, ignoring Michael’s scowl. “I’m sure if you give your brother a little background information on the young man, he’ll relax a little.”

“Or, he’ll take it and run a full background check and then call the guy and make sure he’s so afraid of what will happen if he makes one wrong move that he won’t even ask me out.”

Jordis laughed. "Okay, that's a bit of an exaggeration don't you think?"

"Humph," Raina snorted and flopped back in her seat. "Ask him."

Jordis glanced over at Michael who looked back at her with a blank expression on his face.

"Michael, you didn't?"

He simply shrugged and finished off his beer.

Jordis looked over at a none too happy Raina. "Raina, what's the gentleman's name?"

Raina looked at her brother for a second, then gave an exaggerated sigh. "Christian."

"Christian what?" Michael demanded.

"Let's leave it at Christian for the moment," Jordis interrupted. She gave Michael an indulgent closed-mouth smile when he shot a glare at her. She knew why he wanted that last name and she was intentionally blocking for his sister. He didn't like it. Raina, however, visibly relaxed.

Turning back to Raina, Jordis asked, "How do you know Christian?"

"His brother John attends the art institute with me. They share a car so sometimes, Christian drops him at school and sometimes when we all go out after class, Christian and his buddies are there too."

"Wait a minute," Michael leaned forward. "Is that the clown that honked for you last week at mom's instead of coming to the door to pick you up?"

Raina blushed. "It's not as if he was picking me up for a date. He and John were giving me a ride to class."

"It doesn't matter," Michael insisted. "A man doesn't sit outside in his car and honk for a woman to come out. You should expect better than that."

"Don't be such a dinosaur," Raina groused.

Jordis coughed and picked up her sweet tea to mask her urge to laugh.

Michael gave her a warning look, but Jordis ignored him. "I may be a dinosaur, but I guarantee you that after being out with me, a woman wouldn't give a bozo like that a second thought."

Raina rolled her eyes.

Picking up her fork and beginning to eat, Jordis changed the subject. "So, Raina, how did you get your brother out of the office so early?"

Raina laughed. "Easy. I just asked."

"You mean you just *texted*," Michael clarified.

"Same diff."

"You just asked...um, *texted* what?"

"I asked if he wanted to have dinner with me. See?" Raina reached for the phone clipped at her brother's hip and typed in the code to unlock the phone. She clicked on their text messaging conversation and handed the phone to Jordis.

Jordis looked over at him before looking at the phone. His hand tipped up from his beer as he gave a one-sided shrug, indicating that he didn't mind.

Jordis glanced through the conversation and chuckled when she read the part about Mickey Ds.

"I see," Jordis said as she handed Michael his phone.

Their hands touched. The pulsing physical awareness he felt whenever his skin made contact with hers sparked across his palm. Jordis snatched her hand back quickly, the only indication he

had that their touch had also affected her in some way. She masked any other reaction and simply gave him an enigmatic smile that he'd seen several times. The first time was the day she'd broken down Eric Covington's ass-backwards argument over the pro bono case selection. He had surmised that it usually foretold that the pieces of some puzzle had fallen into place for her and she had her analysis carefully delineated in her mind. That she gave him that look now made him a little uncomfortable. "What exactly do you see?" he asked her.

Jordis simply smiled and continued her meal.

"*Jordis?*" He narrowed his eyes and gave her that don't-play-with-me look.

Her eyes went wide and innocent as she batted her naturally curved eyelashes at him. "*Michael?*" she replied, matching the lilt he'd put on the end of her name.

They stared at each other. She wasn't backing down and she wasn't going to give in to him. He could tell by the set of her lips. Michael wasn't used to women balking at his requests. They usually did exactly what he asked, too afraid that a denial would cross them off his little black list. Women at his firm were particularly compliant. His position as future Managing Partner pretty much made his word their law. Not that he intentionally cultivated such behavior, but he had accepted and gotten used to never being challenged. Jordis must not have gotten the memo. She seemed completely comfortable with her obstinate actions. Despite his annoyance, Michael found himself fighting a smile at the deceptively innocent look on her face. A subdued version of his half smile filtered through despite his best efforts.

* * *

Jordis felt an unfamiliar contentment spread through her chest. Even when he was perturbed, something about Michael Remington made her warm and fuzzy inside. He'd asked her what she

saw. She saw that all the prickly blustering and grumpy mood swings covered a man with a soft heart and a love of family, particularly for his youngest sister. He had hidden sense of humor and a depth of personality those who didn't know him outside the office never saw. She wouldn't tell him all that though.

She realized she liked this guy as a person. He'd already earned her respect as a capable lawyer, but for the first time, she could see the real man behind the Michael Remington mystique. He had a whole other side that the professional facade and legal reputation masked. She was having fun pushing his buttons to see what each revealed. Jordis sat back, a half smile of her own gracing her lips.

Neither Michael nor Jordis seemed to remember that Raina sat at the table with them. After a moment, the clearing of a throat interrupted their stare fest. Their heads swiveled towards Raina with a synchronized swing. She rewarded them with a knowing smile.

Great, Jordis thought. Had her thoughts shown on her face? Did Raina realize she was developing the hots for her brother? That would not be a good thing. Jordis quickly returned her attention to her plate.

Michael held his sister's eye contact a little longer. A silent exchange transpired between them, but Jordis wasn't familiar enough with the siblings to understand the exchange.

When Michael turned back to his plate, Raina gave him a reprieve by turning the conversation to mundane topics. After a while, Michael seemed to relax and enjoy being in the presence of the two women. They continued on that way until the waitress brought the check.

Jordis turned and reached for her purse. A deep voice said, "I've got it."

Jordis looked up to see Michael watching her. "Don't be silly, Michael. You were supposed

to be having dinner with your sister. I got unexpectedly thrown into the mix. I can pay my own share."

"I'm sure you can, but that's not the point." Michael went to reach for his wallet so he missed Mr. Blonde and Shaggy tilt his head quickly two times at Raina in a *come here* motion. Jordis caught the summons out of the corner of her eye.

Raina slid toward Jordis, trying to take advantage of the exchange between Jordis and her brother to make a getaway. "Excuse me," she said.

Jordis put her hand on Raina's arm. "You are not going to respond to that come-hither-babe head shake. If he wants to talk to you, he should come over to the table," Jordis said.

"Like he's going to come over with Michael sitting here." Raina flopped back against the seat and crossed her arms against her chest.

"If he doesn't have the guts to speak to you in front of your brother, he's unlikely to be the kind of guy worth your time in the long run."

Raina pouted without a response.

Jordis signed. "Trust me, Raina. I have one of him of my own." Jordis nodded in Michael's direction. "I learned the hard way that if a guy didn't have the guts to brave my brother to take me out, he ultimately proved himself without enough spine to keep my respect."

Raina's lips slid right and she bit her lip in a contemplative gesture. The low hum of conversation from neighboring tables pulsed around them. A bus boy dropped a large plastic bin on the table immediately to the left of Jordis and began to remove the abandoned plates, glasses and silverware. The clink of knives and spoons hitting glassware hovered while Jordis waited for Raina to make a decision.

"Okay," Raina finally whispered from the cocoon she'd folded in on herself.

"Good. Give him a smile to let him know you noticed him, but wait for him to make the next move." Jordis knew Michael watched her, but she ignored him for the moment. She didn't want to be swayed from encouraging Raina to garner her young man's attention, despite Michael's desire that she do anything but. She looked over and saw that the six gentlemen in various stages of departure. Some hovered over their chairs, others tossed dollar bills onto the tables, and Raina's blonde slid his wallet into his back pocket. Jordis coached Raina. "Smile when he makes eye contact with you."

The young lady looked at her doubtfully, still in a slouched position.

"And you might want to sit up straight so he can see you," Jordis added with a grin.

Sure enough, once he settled his wallet into his pocket, Christian's eyes slid surreptitiously towards Raina. Raina repositioned herself in her seat and smiled at him. Jordis watched Christian's pleased surprise transform slowly into the cocky grin of a guy who'd figured out he'd finally gotten a girl's attention. He turned and murmured something to his buddies. Although they had a clear shot to the front door from their table, the group looped around the back of the table and passed the booth Raina shared with Michael and Jordis.

"Hey, Raina," Christian said, his eyes never leaving her face. "A bunch of us are headed over to the movie theater to catch that new sci-fi flick starring Tom Cruise. Want to join us?"

"Sure." Raina had already started scooting her bottom along the bench seat in the direction of her brother as she responded.

Begrudgingly, Michael rose to let her out. He turned toward Christian, who eyed him warily. Once Raina stood beside Michael, she introduced the two men. Thinking Michael preoccupied

with his introduction to Christian, Jordis reached for the check wallet lying next to Michael's empty dinner plate. Ever aware of his surroundings, Michael placed his left hand atop hers and chastised, "Nice try." Still grasping Jordis's hand over the check wallet, Michael grabbed his sister around the waist and kissed her on the temple. "Thanks for having dinner with me even if you are leaving me hanging."

Raina laughed. "Somehow, big brother, I don't think you're going to miss me." She darted a quick glance at Jordis.

The hug Raina chose to bestow on her brother at that moment hid his answering expression from Jordis. He squeezed her. "Have a good time, but be careful. Call if you need anything." He looked up at Christian and finished, "Anything at all."

"I'll be fine. Stop worrying." Raina fairly skipped out of her brother's arms as she joined Christian and his exiting entourage. At the last minute, Raina turned and, dipping her head towards the battle of hands over the restaurant check, called to Jordis, "Oh, and good luck with that!" Raina's voice held a doubtful tone that made it clear to Jordis that Raina had little confidence Jordis would succeed in her attempt to pay any part of the dinner bill.

Michael turned back to Jordis as his sister walked away. He replaced his left hand with his right so he could slide back into the booth facing the right direction. As he did so, he adjusted his hand so that he held Jordis's instead of merely pressing it down on top of the check.

When he settled in, he turned the full force of those gray eyes on her. "Now that you've managed to get rid of my sister, explain to me why you refuse to let me do something as simple as buy you dinner."

Chapter 8

Jordis slid past Michael as he held the door open for her. She'd given in and let him pay for dinner. When he'd slipped his hand under hers and began rubbing the back of it with his thumb, it hadn't seemed important to explain that she didn't want to owe him anything. She had looked into his eyes and had one thought: *retreat . . .* and retreat immediately.

Michael still had her bag of books. Jordis reached for them as she thanked him once more for dinner.

He held the books out of her way. "Take a walk with me." His eyes slid down to her boots. "That is, if those boots are conducive to strolling."

With her hand still on the handle to the book bag resting on his shoulder, Jordis looked down at her boots and looked back up. She gave him a sexy, flirty smile. "What's the matter? Don't you like my boots?"

"*Cara mia*, I like your boots just fine." He had a wicked look in his eyes. "But trust me, the last thing I think about you doing in those boots is taking a stroll."

His words sent a tremor down Jordis's spine. "Hmm, that sounds interesting." The words came out before she could censor them. Michael's eyes flashed and the provocative nature of her comment hit her after the fact. Why had she said that out loud? And what had he called her? "*Cara Mia*?" Jordis said it flat as if simply trying out the phrase, but her expression made it a question. "Is that what you called me?"

"Did I?" Michael placed his hand around her upper arm and turned her to walk beside him as if he intended to ignore the question.

"Was that Italian?"

He glanced at her quickly. "You speak Italian?"

"No. I spent my junior year of college in France and the summer after in Spain, but I never got to Italy. What does that mean?"

"It's just an Italian expression." When she continued to stare at him, he added, "Don't worry. It's nothing bad." Her firm full bicep flexed under his grip.

After he placed her on the inside of him so that he walked closest to the street, a funny thought occurred to Jordis. Until Michael Remington, she hadn't paid attention that most men didn't follow such simple rules of gallantry any more. Now, being around a man who did it regularly and seemingly without conscious thought, it stood out to her like a lighthouse beacon through heavy fog. She couldn't miss the subtle nuances of the care it suggested and she realized that she liked the way it made her feel—special and...womanly.

Attractive, gallant and he spoke Italian? Was he kidding her? "You speak Italian?"

"Yes."

"Fluently?"

"Yes."

"And where did you learn to speak fluent Italian?"

"At home."

Without breaking her stride, which easily matched his, Jordis stared sideways at him waiting for him to continue.

"And my grandparents' place..." Michael looked over at Jordis and her expression made it clear that he'd have to be more forthcoming, "in Milan."

"Milan?" Jordis stopped walking. "Your grandparents live in *Milan*?"

"My maternal grandparents, yes. I—"

"*Jordis!* Jordis Morgan is that you?" The masculine voice from the past made Jordis immediately numb.

Jordis turned towards the interruption. A tall, well-dressed man with a smooth almond brown complexion stood looking at her. The man wore his hair cut close to his scalp. He had a clean-cut look reminiscent of that actor who played Agent Derrick Morgan on the popular FBI TV drama she liked to watch. *Keith*. His green eyes roved down to her boot-clad feet then back up, lingering a little too long on the front of her sweater. Despite the cheerfulness of his voice, Jordis's reply was substantially less welcoming. "Keith." She let a breath out slowly. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm in town on business. I'm consulting with the Sprint Center as they work through the viability of bringing a WNBA team to Kansas City."

"That's nice. Well, it's been good seeing you again." Jordis turned abruptly to walk away.

"Hey, wait." Keith reached out and touched her arm. He quickly removed his hand when she gave it a chafing look. He cleared his throat and looked quickly from Jordis to Michael.

Jordis reluctantly introduced the two men. "Keith Wilson meet Michael Remington." She gestured with a limp hand, palm up, in the general vicinity of Michael's abdomen. "Michael Remington," the limp hand swung back in the general direction of Keith's abdomen, "Keith Wilson."

Keith reached out a hand to Michael. "Mike, it's nice to meet you."

Michael shook his hand. "Likewise. And the name is Michael."

Keith shot Michael what Jordis had always considered to be his charismatic smile. That look usually charmed everyone he met. Guys wanted to be his buddy; business associates wanted to do his deals; and women simply wanted to do him. Now, the look made her sick to her stomach.

"No disrespect meant, man. Thought we could cut out all the formalities. Any friend of Jordis's is a friend of mine."

Michael replied in a smooth, even tone, "My friends call me *Michael*."

Keith hesitated a moment then chuckled awkwardly. "Well, sure. No problem." Keith shifted and stuck his hand into his pocket. His gaze moved back to Jordis. "I thought maybe we could have dinner together while I'm in town."

"Keith, we've said everything we need to say to each other."

He stepped forward as if to touch her again. "Look, Jordis, I'd like a chance to clear the air. We both said some things last time that I know we regret."

Jordis's tension mounted. She tried to play it cool, but she was having a hard time dealing with the mixture of emotions assaulting her with Michael standing by as a witness. At some point, Michael had positioned himself closer to her, the infinitesimal distance between them disappearing as if by magic. Jordis never felt him move. His warmth radiated into her side. His hand rested above the small of her back. It wasn't a sexual touch. After a brief glance at his face, she intuited that it also wasn't a possessive touch.

He glanced back at her, his eyes soft and concerned. His expression told her everything she needed to know. He wasn't acting out of ego or a need to mark territory in front of another male.

His thumb rubbed in light waves barely noticeable against the layers under her sweater, but she felt it. His touch loosened some of the tension building inside her, shifting her emotional mood. She wasn't used to this kind of support from men—other than her brother. She'd always had to face her battles alone. She'd cultivated internal strength and an indomitable spirit through hard knocks ever since her parents split up when she was nine. Michael's silent offering of support was as irresistible as it was unexpected, making Jordis do something completely foreign to her independent spirit. She leaned into him to accept and relish in that support.

Keith saw the unspoken bond transpire. The bristle to his male ego telegraphed from the flash of barely controlled anger he directed at Michael. Michael's expression didn't change. He stared straight back at Keith, sending the message that he wasn't impressed or cowed by his presence.

"Trust me, Keith. The air is plenty clear. I meant every word I said, and whatever your regrets, it's really irrelevant to me now."

Keith's head tilted slightly and Jordis saw the wheels spinning in his brain.

"Michael *Remington*," Keith said slowly as if the name had suddenly clicked into place. "As in, Remington Hager & Flesching?" Keith looked right at Jordis as he finished. She knew instantly the thought simmering in his brain and it pissed her off.

"Yes," Michael replied, observing the dynamics playing out between the two.

"I see." The condescending grin that crossed Keith's face telegraphed to Jordis an I-was-right-about-you message.

"No, you don't see—"

"Oh, yeah, Jordis. I see you wasted no time. How long have you been at the firm now? Has it even been two months?"

Jordis barely bit back the obscenity that threatened to burst from her mouth at Keith's veiled personal dig. She didn't bother to correct him about the length of her employment at RHF. "No, you *don't* see." She took a step forward. "He *lied*, Keith. He lied to cover his own ass." Her voice dropped to a dangerously calm tenor, but her body still communicated aggression. "Then he used you to make sure his story stuck."

Keith's eyes flashed a momentarily look of doubt.

She pressed her point. "Yeah, think about it. When a woman's own fiancé doesn't trust her integrity, it makes it pretty easy to get others to doubt her word."

Keith glanced at Michael then recovered his bravado. "Is that what you told *him*?" He laughed. "He bought that line?"

Something in Jordis went cold. "If that's still how you feel Keith, why are you standing here claiming you want to 'clear the air'?"

Keith quickly switched tactics. "Look, babe, I miss you." He reached for the hand not pressed against Michael's side, a bold move considering Michael's expression. "I thought maybe you were ready to talk about what really happened. Maybe we can finally get past it and get back to being a team." He reached up to caress a loose curl dangling across her forehead.

Michael's hand went up to block the move as he said, "You need to keep your hands to yourself."

Keith bristled. "Look, man could we have a moment alone, please?"

"No," Michael and Jordis said at the same time.

Michael adjusted her body in way that made it awkward for Keith to continue holding Jordis hand so he released her.

"What do you want, Keith? What's this really about?" Jordis asked him.

Keith looked at Michael again.

"Whatever you want to say to me," Jordis said, "say it. Trust me, he's not going anywhere."

What really happened? She couldn't believe Keith had said that to her. *Get back to being a team.*

Of, course. He wanted something.

Jordis focused her attention on Keith so she missed the look and tilt of head Michael gave him at her comment, but she saw the tightening of Keith's jaw. The familiar tick showed his growing anger. For the first time, she didn't give a damn. The realization helped loosen the tight fist of animosity balled in her chest.

"Clearly, this isn't a good time." Keith reached in his pocket for his wallet, pulled it out, and retrieved a business card. He placed it in Jordis's hand. "Here's my card. I'll be in town for two weeks. Give me a call when you're ready to talk."

Jordis looked down at the card in her hand.

Keith looked past her again at the man standing at her shoulder. "*Michael*," he said with an obvious inflection in his voice.

Michael's smile stayed as easy and nonchalant as his tone. He nodded his head in dismissal. "Keith."

* * *

Jordis squeezed the business card into a wadded ball. Her eyes followed the retreating back of Keith Wilson. "He just ruined a perfectly good day."

Her voice held a tense edge that affected Michael in a strange way. He didn't like her mood. Stepping behind her, he placed his right hand on her waist and reached around with his left hand

to open her fist. “No, he didn’t.” When her hand unwound, he removed the wadded card, “Because we are not going to let him,” and dropped it into a neighboring trash receptacle.

Jordis looked over her shoulder at him.

“You still owe me a stroll, Ms. Morgan. Come with me.” He took her hand and pulled her towards street.

“Where are we going?”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and sent several text messages. Satisfied, he nodded before placing it back in his pocket.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

As they walked, they blended in with the shoppers, families and couples enjoying the final weekend of the Plaza Christmas lights. They’d strolled several blocks before Jordis realized they were still holding hands. The temperature had dropped considerably with the sun now down, but the warmth in his hands felt perfect.

They reached the corner where passengers commandeered horse-drawn carriages for a fee. Several people waited in line for carriages to return. Michael stopped by the crowd. Jordis looked over at him with a question in her eyes. He gave her that smile often used by parents to keep children in suspense when planning a surprise. Soon, the clip clop of horse hooves against frigid concrete drew Jordis’s attention to an approaching carriage. Unconsciously, she squeezed Michael’s hand while her heart palpitated. Open steel bars shaped like a pumpkin sat atop a carriage bed to create the ambience for the popular Cinderella carriage. Drawn by a speckled white stallion, the glow of white Christmas lights wrapped around the pumpkin cage made the coach appear almost magical.

“I used to love riding in that carriage at Christmas time when I was a kid.” Jordis’s voice softened with the pleasure of her memories. “I wonder who has the next ride.”

The carriage pulled to a stop at the curb. The father of a family of four approached the driver of the carriage intending to purchase the next ride. Jordis watched the driver shake his head negatively indicating that the carriage had already been reserved.

“It looks like someone has it reserved,” Jordis said. “Too bad. It would have been fun to take a ride.”

Michael squeezed her hand back. “Then let’s do that.”

“You brought me here to take a carriage ride?”

Her baffled expression made him want to laugh. He approached the carriage, pulling her along by their still joined hands. “Yes. In fact, I thought I’d take you for a ride in this carriage.” He motioned towards the Cinderella carriage.

Jordis stopped moving. Her expression turned from bafflement to disbelief. “But...the carriage is reserved.”

Michael pulled her to him and lowered his voice. “It’s reserved for us.”

“But, how did you—?”

Michael tapped the breast pocket of his coat. “The wonders of modern technology.”

“That’s what you were doing? Making reservations for a carriage ride?” An eerie feeling tickled her heartstrings. Had his reservation coincidentally pulled the Cinderella carriage or...?

“Yes, I was arranging this *particular* carriage ride.”

Wind whipped more loose tendrils of hair around her face. “Why did you do that?”

Michael reached up and brushed the strands off her face. He saw her shiver and wrapped her

scarf more firmly around her neck, pulled her collar up on her coat and buttoned the top button. “Because I heard you tell my sister that when your mother brought you and your brother to the Plaza for a carriage ride, you always selected this carriage when it was your turn to pick. No matter what had happened that week or that day, a ride in the Cinderella carriage always made you feel happy. After Mr. Wilson, I thought a little carriage therapy was in order.” He fidgeted with loose hair tendrils some more. “Now, stop questioning me and get in the carriage, Jordis. You’re wasting the night.”

With his assistance, Jordis did as he asked and climbed into the carriage. Michael climbed up beside her.

The driver looked over his shoulder and checked, “All set, folks?”

Michael nodded and the renewed clip clop of hooves announced their departure.

As the carriage pulled off, Jordis turned toward Michael. “You were listening the whole time.”

Apparently, she hadn’t realized he was paying attention when she’d talked with Raina about her memories of carriage rides on the Plaza. “Yes, I was listening.”

Jordis smiled at him. It was a brilliant smile and he suddenly wanted to thank Keith Wilson for inspiring him to charter a carriage ride to make her feel better. That smile was worth the astronomical fee he’d had to pay to guarantee the availability of the carriage.

Jordis hunkered down in her coat.

“You cold?” he asked her.

“Just a little. I guess I spent too many years in L.A. and my blood hasn’t thickened back up yet.”

Michael leaned towards the driver and asked him to pull over up ahead. Turning back to Jordis, he said, "I'll be right back."

Jordis watched as he jumped out of the carriage and walked purposefully into a coffee shop. A few minutes later he returned with two tall cups of steaming liquid. Climbing back into the carriage, he handed her a cup.

Jordis took a sip. "Mmm. What is this?"

"Good?" he asked.

"Delicious. It taste almost like gourmet hot chocolate, but it clearly has some coffee in it."

Michael chuckled as she took another long sip and a look of ecstasy crossed her face. "I noticed that you always seem to drink tea so I told the barista that you're not really a coffee drinker but I was trying to corrupt you. She came up with this. It's a milk chocolate turtle mocha. Do you like it?"

"It's incredible. What's in it?"

"Two types of gourmet chocolate including chocolate shavings, real cream, flavored cappuccino and a little something secret that I can't get the owner to tell me."

"Well, I wouldn't tell you either if I had a hot chocolate recipe like this. I'd be a millionaire from hot chocolate sales alone. Have you talked to them about protecting this wonderful trade secret?"

Michael looked at her for a moment. "Actually, no. I never thought about it. But you're right. Dana should be taking precautions with her recipe."

"Dana? You know the owner well?"

"Yes, she graduated from high school with my older sister, Liliana. She was always at the

house for some reason or another.”

“I’d love an introduction. A little IP protection and a targeted social media campaign and we could make this shop the place to come for gourmet beverages. Then, Dana and her staff could upsell their other goodies.”

Her brain always seemed to be working. He’d never thought about a business pitch to Dana. He rarely got involved with clients until they had a dispute they wanted to squash or litigation they needed to win. Jordis’s mind appeared to work on a proactive basis all the time. He liked that. The team on the transactional side of things has been after him for the last few years to work on a targeted cross-marketing campaign with the IP litigation group. Maybe he needed to put Jordis to work on the project as the liaison between the groups.

Michael’s thoughts shifted back to Keith Wilson. When the man first approached Jordis, Michael had disliked him immediately. The force of that emotion had surprised him. He wanted to ask Jordis about her relationship with Keith, but he didn’t want to risk a downturn in her current mood. He’d gleaned that they’d been engaged and that things had not ended on a good note. He was curious about why, but he’d ask her some other time.

Enjoying the calming motion of the carriage ride, Michael placed his arm along the seat behind Jordis’s head. Every once in a while, without conscious thought, he ran his fingers through the hair of her ponytail.

After a while, she asked him. “So, tell me about these grandparents in Milan.”

A relaxed smile still graced her face. It was the first time he’d felt that she was totally at ease around him.

He didn’t usually talk about his family. People had a way of taking personal information and

using it like weapons in warfare. His ex had. She'd even gone so far as to fake an interest in motorcycles by buying one of her own. Whenever he made plans to ride with her, something always came up. It wasn't until after he'd found out about her plans to fawn her pregnancy by another man off as his that he'd finally put two and two together. She had scoped him out and planned his seduction like a professional mercenary staging a coup. The destruction she'd wreaked on his faith in women and belief in romantic love had been fatal.

Somehow with Jordis, he didn't feel that tight pull of angst that usually accompanied a woman's inquiry into his personal life. In fact, he felt compelled to tell her about his Italian roots.

"They're my maternal grandparents. My parents met the summer after my father graduated from college. He embarked on a summer tour of Europe. On his jaunt through Milan, he spied a beautiful Italian girl coming out of a gelato shop with a group of friends one day. According to my father, she'd been breathtaking. He couldn't take his eyes off her. Eventually, she'd noticed him staring and had smiled at him before disappearing from the piazza.

"My dad always chuckled when he described how, try as he might, he'd been unable to stop thinking about the Italian beauty so he'd returned every day for five straight days to the same spot at the same time of day hoping she would show up again. On the fifth and final day, he'd resolved that if she didn't show, he would relent and move on to the next city on his itinerary. He sat outside the gelato shop that day for four long hours. As dusk began to filter over the piazza, he gathered his disappointment and rose to leave. That's when he saw my mom walking across the piazza alone. She'd come specifically to find him. From that moment on, the two spent every possible minute together, deciding to make it permanent after knowing each other for only two

weeks.”

“Wow. That’s very romantic.”

“My grandfather didn’t think so.”

“No?”

“Nope. Apparently, he was dismayed when the ‘smooth-talking American’,” he made air quotes, “requested permission to marry his daughter. Grandfather had expected my mom to marry a nice Italian boy and raise tons of children in Milan, not abscond to another continent with an Anglo.”

“Ah.” She nodded her head. “Same story. Different continent.”

He stared at her for a moment. “Is it?” Those eyes of hers watched him closely, waiting for him to continue. He reached out a hand and fingered her cheek. “How do you feel about Anglos, Jordis?”

Jordis fumbled the coffee cup in her hand. She tried to grab it, but shaking hands and marked surprised weren’t a good combination and the cup tilted from her grasp. Michael managed to grab the cup before her lap was covered in leftover chocolate mocha. He tucked it aside.

“I...um...What do you mean?” Her soft voice contrasted with the look of amazement on her face.

Michael saw her eyes darken slightly, the way they had last night when he’d kissed her. The realization that she wasn’t wholly immune to him sent a jolt of adrenaline through him. He’d initially been reluctant to bring up the topic, but the more attracted to her he became, the more important it was for him to know her preference in men. Her reaction told him a lot about what he needed to know, but he wanted to hear her say it. Enjoying her reaction, Michael leaned back

in his seat and undid the sole fastened button on his coat. He was suddenly feeling a lot warmer.

“I think you know what I mean.”

Chapter 9

Jordis's eyes slid over him from head to toe in the few seconds it took for her to adjust her body upright after the coffee scare. Michael Remington had sex appeal in spades and she suspected that he knew it. His posture oozed confident masculinity. His magnetism was accentuated by that slightly long—some would say too long—dark hair that, for the moment, hung loosely across his forehead. He was an odd set of contrasts. Staunchly proper and GQ in the office, he came off as conservative and straight-laced. But here on a carriage ride with her wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt, he looked edgy and even a little dangerous. Heck, give the man a leather jacket and a Harley and he'd be the quintessential bad boy.

He was quite yummy...for a white guy. Hell, who was she kidding, for any guy. The last thing she needed, however, was for him to know she thought so. So, she tried to keep her expression neutral.

Holding her gaze, he pressed for an answer to his question. "There's that old cliché that women like their men tall, dark and handsome." He was sporting that half smile that she'd bet a year's salary made women of every persuasion want to drop their panties. "I'm just curious," he continued. "What's your perspective?"

Jordis recognized the flirtatious mischief in his eyes and gathered her aplomb. "My perspective is," she positioned herself with her back angled against the corner of the carriage bench farthest away from him, "that there's usually a basis for most clichés. I'd have to say that

tall, dark and handsome always worked for me.” She flashed her own mischievous grin.

Angling his body towards her, he asked, “So, just how *dark* does your tall and handsome have to be?”

They stared at each other for about five seconds, but to Jordis it could have been five hours.

“Are you...asking me...?” Her voice trailed off. She dared not voice what she thought he was asking. She was riding through the Plaza with the heir apparent to the one of the most successful law firms in the city. Everyone knew that he, as the only attorney among the living relatives of any of the founding members of the firm, was the crowned prince and soon to be managing partner. He’d been labeled the most eligible bachelor at the firm. He was probably one of the most eligible bachelors in the city. Yet, no matter how many women threw themselves at him, he managed to avoid office interludes and serious relationships. With all that going on, she couldn’t fathom why he was asking her about her preference in men as if he were interviewing her to be his potential paramour. Surely, she was missing something.

“What I’m asking, Ms. Morgan,” his voice dropped half an octave, “is if you’ve ever had a white guy before?”

Her mouth fell open. She felt her nipples tightened under her shirt. The rousing image evoked by his question—her having her way with this particular white guy—made her hormones vibrate. Her hand tightened into a ball on the seat.

He leaned towards her, placing his hand on the side of the carriage behind her. The scent of his cologne filled her. He was wearing that musky fragrance, marked with patchouli and sandalwood, which made her salivate. The aphrodisiac quality of the scent made this interlude so much more troubling than the mere words alone. Her eyes closed.

He gently touched her face. “Well?” he asked softly when she opened her eyes.

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. She hadn’t. But, if she were ever going to have one, he’d be at the top of her list. He was easily the sexiest man she’d ever met. She hesitated, struggling against the loaded question she knew better than to ask, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Why?”

He smirked. “Do I really have to spell it out?”

“Michael, I think we need to talk about something else.” She avoided the obvious question of whether he’d ever been with a woman like her before. It didn’t really matter since he was making his interest in her very clear. How much of that interest was genuine and how much was just curiosity, she didn’t know. What she did know was that she needed the topic of conversation to change before they ended up crossing the line again, a line that was getting blurrier to her by the second.

“Do we?”

“Yes,” Jordis said, pulling her coat tighter around her.

His eyes watched her movement. “I tell you what. If you slide back over here so I can continue to keep you warm, I’ll drop my line of questioning and we can just enjoy the rest of the ride.”

Step into my parlor said the spider to the fly. The nursery school line popped into her head as she considered his offer. She *was* getting cold again, but sidling up next to him right now didn’t seem like a smart move.

He reached for her. “Come here, Jordis. I promise to be on my best behavior.”

Jordis allowed him to pull her close, her posture stiff and unnatural. After a few minutes,

snow flurries began to fall. She raised a palm and caught a few flakes. She glanced at Michael as they melted in her hand. “It’s starting to snow.” She didn’t think there was anything quite as beautiful as a carriage ride in the snow through the Plaza lights. It was too beautiful a night to waste on worries. It wasn’t as if he was going to jump her right here in plain view. She relaxed and they rode in silence and simply enjoyed the view.

The evening got late. Reluctantly, Jordis broke into the snowy fantasy with a voice of practicality. “We should probably call it a night. I think we’ve monopolized this carriage enough for one evening.”

“It’s your call. We’ve got the carriage for the rest of the evening if you want.” He glanced at his watch. “Granted they only run for about another thirty minutes, but the thirty minutes are yours if you want them.”

She struggled to resist the tempting offer, but she lost the battle. After a moment, she adjusted her coat in a way that covered her knees and placed her more firmly against his side. “Why don’t we have him make one more loop around Seville Square and drop us by the bookstore? I parked in the lot right next door.”

Michael smiled to himself. “Okay, sounds good.” Michael instructed the driver as to their final run and settled in to enjoy the feel of Jordis in his arms a little longer. As they approached the bookstore, Michael remembered he had her bag of books on the seat next to him. He pulled up the bag and glanced in. He pulled out the mega book on top, checked the cover and glanced at her. “Stephen King? I never would have pegged you for a horror fan.” She seemed way to upbeat and Girl Scout for that.

“Oh, there’s a lot about me you probably wouldn’t suspect.”

Made curious by that statement, Michael went to reach into the bag for her other treasures.

“Hey,” she cried when she saw what he was doing. She reached across him, grabbing for her bag. The movement placed her slightly across his lap. Her hand squished down the top of the bag. “A girl’s reading material is personal unless she offers to share.”

“Umm, is that all I had to do to get you in my lap tonight?”

Jordis straightened as if she’d been prodded with a poker.

Michael chuckled at the look on her face. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “You know, you didn’t have to come up with an excuse. You’re welcome to climb into my lap anytime.”

Jordis tried not to smile, but she couldn’t help herself.

Just then, the carriage driver reined in the white stallion pulling the carriage and parked in front of the bookstore. Michael replaced her book and exited the carriage. He reached back to help her down, taking another look at her long legs covered by those knee high boots. “Especially, if you’re wearing those boots,” he said in her ear once he had her on the ground.

Michael released her long enough to tip the carriage driver. As they stepped away from the carriage, they nearly bumped—literally—into Eric Covington escorting a tall blue-eyed blonde.

“Well, small world,” Eric said.

“Eric,” Michael replied, jaw tight.

“What brings you two here tonight?” Eric glanced over at Jordis.

“I ran into Jordis coming out of the bookstore. We decided to grab a beverage at the *La Dolce Vita* and enjoy what’s left of the Plaza lights.”

Well, he’d given most of the truth, Jordis thought. Eric’s expression said he thought there was more to the story as his eyes flicked to the carriage pulling off behind them.

“Sounds good.” Eric gave Jordis an ingracious smile before focusing back on Michael. “Any way, I guess I’ll be seeing you in the morning.”

“Yeah.”

“Usual time?”

“Yes. We’re on the same court as last time.”

Jordis looked between the two men. “What’s going on tomorrow morning?”

The superior tilt of Eric’s smile got more pronounced.

Michael answered Jordis. “Basketball. A few of the guys get together on a regular basis to play a few pickup games.”

“A few of the guys?” Now she understood the superior glint in Eric’s eyes. He was letting her know that he had an ace up his sleeve. Nothing like sports bonding to keep the good ole boy network strong and woman-free. “Only the guys in the firm are invited to play?”

“Well, Jordis, I doubt any of the women would really want to play with us,” Eric said.

“I would.”

Eric laughed. “Yeah, right. This isn’t HORSE we’re playing, Jordis. We play a real, serious ball game. We don’t want to have to take it easy because we’ve got girls on the court.”

“So you’re saying only men are allowed to play in the firm pickup game?”

Michael interrupted, “Of course not.” He looked at Jordis knowingly. He was smart enough to surmise that anything other than a denial from him would give her an opening to suggest sexual discrimination. “Anyone is welcome to play, but no woman has ever decided to join us.”

Jordis looked at Michael. “Has one ever been invited?”

Michael didn’t answer, choosing not to boxed himself into a corner.

Jordis looked back at Eric and smiled. “Where’s the game being played? I’d love to join you guys tomorrow morning.”

After going over the particulars of the game, Eric walked away with his date and Michael shepherded her towards the parking garage. Coat collars turned up against the cold, they strode quickly with Michael’s arm firmly around her waist. As they entered the garage and neared her Charger, Michael frowned. ”You don’t have another car?”

“No. There’s nothing wrong with this car.”

Michael glanced outside the parking garage at the snow flurries falling heavier now. He glanced back at her. “Except it’s useless in snowy weather. This model doesn’t even have front wheel drive.”

“I know. I’ve thought about that. I keep thinking I ought to get a four-wheel drive SUV or something, but I can’t bring myself to part with the Bee. So far the weather’s been mild enough that it hasn’t mattered.”

“Jordis, you make enough money to have more than one car. Why not buy a second car to drive in the winter?”

“I don’t know. It just seems wasteful for a single person to have multiple cars, particularly if I’m only going to drive one a few months out of the year.”

Michael cleared his throat and looked away.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

Her eyes narrowed for a minute. “Michael, exactly how many cars do *you* have?”

“Well...” He hesitated as if reluctant to discuss the subject. Then he grinned. “If you don’t

count the Ford F350 I use to haul around my motorcycle, I have three.”

Her face was incredulous. “You own three cars, a truck and a motorcycle?”

“Yes, Ms. Do-Right. And maybe I should drive you home in my weather-appropriate SUV.”

Jordis opened her car door then reach for the bag of books he carried, shaking her head. “I’ll be fine. The snow isn’t even sticking to the ground.”

He glanced out at the street once again. They were wet, but not accumulating any snow. It was early enough that if she went right home, she shouldn’t face any challenging roads.

When he looked back at her, she was smiling at him. “You really are a dinosaur. I don’t know whether to be flattered by your gallantry or insulted that you think so little of my driving skills.” She brushed a light dusting of snow off the shoulders of his coat.

“Be flattered.” He grabbed her hand and kissed it. “Make sure you go straight home. Kansas City weather is temperamental. This could turn heavy without warning.”

Her heart did a little flip when he kissed her hand. The warm tingling sensation she’d been feeling since he’d charter a carriage ride to cheer her ramped up to a hotter setting. She leaned into him without removing her hand from his. “Relax, Michael. I’ve got your number. If I run into any trouble, I promise I’ll call.”

“Unless you get a call from your brother.”

She laughed. “Touché.” She crossed her heart with her other hand. “I promise. No distractions. No diversions. If I need assistance, I will call.” Before he could say anything else she added, “And I’ll call to let you know I made it home safe.”

He nodded, satisfied. “Okay.” They stood staring at each other. His hand wrapped around hers. He pressed their joined hands against his chest as he pulled her closer. His voice dropped to

a husky whisper. "I want to kiss you."

"I know," she sighed.

"You know?" The curved of his lips showed his amusement. He reached up with his other hand and caressed her face.

"Yeah. I know." She wore a sad smile. "I want you to kiss me." She stepped back. "But you're not going to."

"I'm not?"

"No, you're not. We agreed that wasn't going to happen again."

"Did we? I don't remember that." He pulled her back against him.

"Michael," she snatched her hand away and stepped into the cocoon of her open car door, "I'm going home now. Thank you for dinner and the lovely carriage ride. I had fun."

Michael slid his hands in his pants pockets. "You're welcome," he said, fingering the silver chain he hadn't thought about in the days since he met Jordis.

Jordis got into her car and started her engine.

After a moment, Michael turned and started walking towards his SUV. Jordis watched his retreating back, regret strong in the pit of her stomach. If only she'd met him some other time or some other place. Why did the sexiest man on the planet have to be her boss?

That thought had barely crossed her mind when she saw Michael turn around and stride purposefully back towards her car. He snatched the car door open, reached in and pulled her up against him. With one hand inside her coat, firmly wrapped around her waist, and the other hand against the back of her head, he kissed her like a soldier going off to war saying goodbye to his new bride.

She melted, completely.

Her hands grasped the lapels of his coat as she kissed him back, releasing all the pent up sexual frustration she'd been fighting all day. He pressed her against the side of her car, pushing his tongue deep as he devoured her mouth. She responded in kind, pulling him tight against her so she could feel all his hard body parts with every thrust of his tongue. When they finally came up for breath, they were both panting.

He placed his forehead against hers. "For the record, I never agreed not to kiss you again. You're the one who stated we were both in agreement that it would never happen again. I never conceded the point."

Such a lawyer, she thought, smiling to herself. "You don't have to concede the point, counselor. You know as well as I do that we can't carry on given our work relationship."

Both hands on either side of her head, he stared into her eyes. "I can't seem to get you out of my system. Working relationship be damned. I'll find a way to handle this."

With that, he planted a brief kiss on her lips and folded her back into her car. Right before he shut the door, he ordered, "Lock the door this time."

As soon as he closed the door, she complied. Her hands were shaking. He was half way to his SUV before she recovered enough to put her seat belt on. She looked up to find him watching her from the seat of his car. He wouldn't pull off until she did. Shifting the Charger into reverse, Jordis backed out of her parking space and exited the parking garage. He followed her all the way to the highway, merging onto I-35 North right behind her and taking the interchange for I-169 North when she did. For a moment, she thought he would follow her all the way home, but he turned off at the exit leading to the ritzy Briarcliff West neighborhood.

She was surprisingly relieved. Despite her worked up hormones, she had a sinking feeling she wasn't quite ready to handle Mr. Remington. He was quite a charming companion when he wasn't in his brooding or domineering mode. She had the uncomfortable feeling she'd allowed herself to become way more familiar with her boss than was wise. If the carriage ride hadn't crossed the line, then that parting kiss definitely had. His words resounded in her head. *Working relationship be damned. I'll find a way to handle this.* What was that supposed to mean?

Chapter 10

All heads turned towards Jordis as she walked into the gym the next day. She had her hair pulled back in a high ponytail and wore an Under Armor workout suit in red with a white stripe down the side of the pants. The pant legs were unzipped from the bottom and showed a hint of white Nike hightops with a red Swoosh. She walked in carrying her own basketball under one arm and a duffle bag strapped over the other shoulder.

That she'd come dressed to play didn't surprise Michael, but her air of total confidence as she walked towards a court full of men did. This wasn't the lady who wore Michael Kors suits, three-inch heels and French manicures. Those Nikes had seen a court before. She hadn't put together some new outfit to impress the boys. She'd played ball before. Where and how well they'd soon find out.

"Who's the girl?" Jackson Montgomery asked Michael. Due to his wife's car accident, Jackson had been holed up in the hospital so long, it had taken a near act of Congress for Michael to convince him to come out and blow off some steam.

"That's Jordis Morgan," Eric Covington volunteered as he stepped up to the two partners. His tone indicated how he felt about her presence.

Chase followed with Royal McCormick, partner in the Business and Finance group.

"What's the big deal gents?" Chase asked. "The lady came to play. Since we have an uneven number of players today, Jordis will help even out the teams."

Only five guys had made it to the court this morning. Jordis made six. They would have to play three-on-three.

“Yeah, but which team gets stuck with her?” Eric asked.

“I say the former college basketball stars get the girl,” said Royal.

Chase and Michael looked at each other. Generally the group tried to divide them, feeling they had an unfair advantage having played ball together at Michigan State. Today, it would seem the group figured having a woman on their team would be such a handicap that they wouldn't be much of a threat.

Jordis stepped up to the group. “Gentlemen, how's it going this morning?”

“Just fine, lovely lady.” McCormick advanced and shook her hand. “It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Roy McCormick, Business and Finance.”

“Hello, Roy.” She smiled. “Jordis Morgan, Intellectual Property.” She glanced around the bunch, introduced herself to Jackson Montgomery then turned back to Roy. “So, it's a pleasure meeting me, Roy, but not playing with me?”

“Um, well...,” Roy looked to Remington for help.

Jordis laughed at his fumbling. “Don't worry, Roy. I won't hold it against you that you chose to pawn me off on the ‘former college basketball stars’.”

“You heard that, huh?” McCormick grinned at her, non-apologetic.

“Yeah, I heard it.” Jordis's smile remained casual. She moved a little closer to Roy and smoothed the front of his shirt in a flirtatious gesture. She left her hand resting over his heart.

“You sure you want to give me away, Roy, without even knowing if I can play?”

Roy licked his lips. “Darling, I'd love to take you on, but I don't think here's the right time or

the place.”

Michael’s jaw tightened at McCormick’s double entendre. He knew Roy well and Roy wasn’t talking about a round on the basketball court. Michael controlled his urge to pull Jordis away from his colleague. Watching her paw Roy’s chest was breaking him out in hives.

Chase took one look at Michael’s tense posture and grabbed Jordis by the arm, pulling her away from McCormick. “Well, then, Jordis, it looks like you’re with us.”

She looked over at Michael. “That okay with you, boss?”

Michael gritted his teeth at the boss moniker. He hated it when she referred to him that way and she knew it. She did it as a way to keep distance between them. Reminding him that their relationship as supervisory attorney and associate made a sexual relationship taboo. He wasn’t going to let her get to him today. “No problem at all, Miss Morgan.” He motioned for her basketball and she tossed it lightly. “Now, get those pants off so we can play some ball.”

When the pants and jacket did come off, Jordis wore black spandex biking shorts with a red Nike basketball tank edged in white and stenciled with the number 23. The tank hung to her hips, but did little to hide her shapely backside. Michael’s mouth went dry. He noticed the other men checking her out. He suddenly wanted her to put her pants back on. It dawned on him that having her on his team meant someone from the other team would be guarding her. Some other man would be putting his hands on her hips and backside to guard against her offensive moves on the court. The thought made him want to rescind her invitation to play.

When they lined up on the court, Michael consciously squared up against McCormick. He still had some residual angst from the flirtation that had gone on between the partner and Jordis. He wasn’t giving McCormick any excuse to get up close and personal with her. Roy would enjoy

that way too much. Chase took on Jackson, which left Jordis and Eric guarding each other.

Eric decided to act gallant and tossed the ball to Jordis. “Ladies first. Take the ball out.”

“Why thank you, Eric.” Jordis said with a faux smile. She let him check the ball. When he stayed back, playing her loosely, she dribbled once and immediately put up a jumper for a three-point shot.

“Ho!” McCormick exclaimed, raising his hands above his head in the universal touchdown gesture. “Nothing but net.” McCormick looked at Jackson and Covington. “Boys, did we just get played?”

Jordis winked at him and McCormick eyed her with a little more heat.

Eric eyed her with a little more venom.

Eric began to play more aggressively. Every time he touched Jordis defensively, Michael’s teeth clenched. At the rate things were going, he would need a set of partials before the game finished.

About midway through the game, Chase, Jordis and Michael were up ten points. Jordis got the ball again. She’d taken the last four shots over Eric and his expression showed exactly how he felt about that. When she went up for a jumper this time, Eric hammered her hard. Jordis hit the ground with a grunt.

Michael moved quickly, but Chase got to her first. “Foul, Covington! What the hell was that all about?”

“What? All I did was block the shot. If she can’t handle playing with boys, she needs to get off the court.”

“Bullshit, Covington. That was a cheap shot,” Chase said and shoved him out of the way.

“Don’t let it happen again.” Chase turned as Michael stepped over, watching to see if he’d need to intervene between Michael and Covington.

Lucky for Eric, Michael only had eyes for Jordis. He squatted beside her. “You alright?”

“Yeah. No real harm done.” She sat up and looked over at Eric, mumbling a curse under her breath.

Michael noticed the direction of her gaze. “I’ve got Covington from here on out.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Look, Jordis. That was intentional. He’s trying to make a point and I’ve had enough of these games between you two.”

“Yeah, me too and I’m about to put a stop to it.” She reached out a hand. “Help me up, please.”

Michael gave her a tug up and Chase step over to huddle with them. “What’s the plan? Michael, you taking Covington?”

Chase knew him well. “Yes.”

“No,” Jordis said at the same time. She looked at Michael. “No, Remington. Covington is mine.”

Fury settled in Michael’s chest and he had a good idea of how to use it to put Covington in his place. Jordis’s determination to do this her way didn’t sit well with him. He sensed another battle of wills coming on.

Chase looked between the two. He gave Michael a sympathetic look, but took the decision out of Michael’s hands by asking Jordis, “What do you want us to do?”

Jordis looked at Chase and put out her hand. “Give me the ball and clear the field.”

“Jordis—“ Michael started but she interrupted him.

“Michael, you interfere in this and I’ll turn that Jag parked outside into a crushed aluminum can. Let me handle Eric. Pick up your man and keep him out of my way.”

Michael’s brow creased at her reference to his Jag, but he nodded and stepped over to McCormick.

“Your girl alright, Remington?” McCormick asked.

“She’s not my girl,” Michael ground out.

McCormick chuckled. “Maybe not, but you sure want her to be.”

Michael looked at his partner, wondering why he’d said that.

“Dude, it’s written all over your face. I’m surprised Covington can still walk.”

“If it were up to me, he wouldn’t be able to.”

McCormick watched Jordis check the ball for Eric. “Feisty one, huh?”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

The men’s focus went back to the game as Eric made a move to get around Jordis and she knocked the ball away. Throwing her whole body into the move, she knocked him on his ass in the process.

“Oh, sorry. My bad. You okay, Eric,” she said reaching out a hand to him.

He looked at her a long moment before extending his hand to let her pull him up. “Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s go again, counselor.”

This time Jordis had the ball. When Eric pressed her, she dribbled behind her back, slid past him and went for an easy layup. They kept at each other that way basket after basket. Eric would shove. Jordis would shove back. For every basket Eric made, Jordis would make two. Every

once in a while, Jordis would see an opening and drill the ball to Chase or Michael for an easy shot, but for the most part, the other men on the court accepted that the rest of the game was the Jordis and Eric show.

Jordis was up nine baskets to Eric's five and Eric was getting frustrated. His deteriorating attitude affected his performance. Jordis had him on the ropes. She set up for the winning shot. Eric crouched to guard her. She kept her dribble out of his reach. She toyed with him, dribbling the ball between her legs and behind her back a few times for show. Then, stepping theatrically outside the three-point line, she pivoted towards the basket and released the ball. Her hand hovered in the air, wrist bent in homage to her follow through. *Swish*, nothing but net.

"I believe that's game, boys," Jordis purred before going for her towel and wiping her face. She picked up her belongings and headed for the locker room.

Behind her, Eric bent over and placed his hands on his knees while he tried to catch his breath.

McCormick stepped up and patted him on the back, "Damn, son, the next time you decide to start a battle, you might want to have a little more intel on your opponent. That lady just took you to school." He glanced up at Jordis's retreating back. "And she looked damn good doing it." With a smile in Remington's direction, McCormick grabbed his bag and headed for the men's locker room.

Chase stepped up to Michael, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I think McCormick is in love." Chase laughed at the predatory expression Michael gave him. "Don't shoot the messenger. Just saying." Chase lifted his hands in mock surrender then went for their duffle bags.

Michael took his bag from Chase and headed for the men's locker room. "Did you know she

could play ball like that?”

Chase walked alongside him. “Nope. That little tidbit wasn’t included in her resume, *boss*.”

Now Chase was screwing with him. Michael’s nerves had had enough. As they entered the locker room, Michael leaned his shoulder into Chase and shoved hard. Chase landed with an echoing thud against the lockers.

Chase laughed. “Tsk. Tsk. Someone’s awful touchy this morning.” Chase headed for the showers, his jovial mood not shaken in the least.

Thirty minutes later, Chase and Michael strolled towards the gym exit. As they hit the sidewalk, Michael paused. Jackson’s car was gone, but Jordis’s car sat in the parking lot under a shade tree. “She’s still here.”

“She who?” Chase asked, feigning ignorance.

“You know, Chase. You keep messing with me and I’m going to kick your ass.”

“You and what army?” Chase jumped aside with a laugh when Michael dropped his duffle bag and grabbed for his head. Tossing his hands up, he conceded, “Okay. Okay. Sorry man. You’re just such an easy target these days. You need to take care of that.”

“If only it were that easy.”

“It’s that easy if you let it be.” Chase turned serious. “Not every woman is like your ex, Michael. You’ve got to stop looking for goldiggers and schemers around every corner and let yourself relax around a woman. The woman in there,” he tilted his head towards the gym, “has made it pretty clear that she’s not impressed with your position, your bank account, or your Jag for that matter.”

They both glanced over at his 2010 silver Jaguar XF, remembering Jordis’s aluminum can

threat.

Michael checked his watch, wondering what was taking Jordis so long. Soon the parking lot on this side of the building would be empty. The private court at the back of the facility cost more to rent and generally only got reserved for nighttime events and fundraisers. Other than their firm games, the court didn't see much activity during early weekend hours.

Michael picked up his discarded bag and told Chase he was going back in to check on Jordis. Chase gave him a fist bump and walked away. When Michael reached the gym door, McCormick and Covington exited the building. They said their goodbyes to Michael and headed for two of the remaining five cars in the lot. Eric paused, glanced at the Jag—with plates REM ESQ—then over at the orange Charger. With Chase pulling out of the lot and McCormick getting in his car, the other car could only belong to Jordis.

Eric tossed his duffle bag in his trunk and looked over at the gym door. He got in his car and rolled down the driver's side window, pondering the coincidence of Michael and Jordis being together on the Plaza last night and now being the last ones left in the building. He was still stewing over the ass whipping Jordis had given him on the court. The thought of her alone with Remington inside the gym pissed him off more. They'd looked pretty cozy coming off that carriage ride. From what he could see, he was losing the bid for second chair in the Metra Pharmaceuticals case for all the wrong reasons. If Jordis got the Metra assignment and handled it successfully, he'd be hard pressed to win the litigation partnership spot up for grabs this year. He needed to find a way to take Jordis Morgan out of the picture, especially with Remington making case decisions with his privates.

* * *

Jordis lay with her back against the locker room bench, legs straddling either side, feet on the floor. Her side hurt where Eric had elbowed her dozens of times and she could feel the wrist on her shooting arm cramping up. She hadn't played ball in a while. She certainly hadn't expected to go at it this hard during what was supposed to be a friendly firm pickup game.

The effort to get her tank off had been excruciating. Bruises had already started to form along her side and rib cage. They wouldn't be pretty come tomorrow. She lifted her arm over her head and winced at the painful tug along her side. She needed a shower, but the thought of trying to pull her sports bra off made her cringe.

A knock sounded on the locker room door.

"Jordis, you in there."

Michael.

"Yeah. Come on in."

Michael rounded the corner and saw her laid out on the locker room bench.

Jordis dragged herself to an upright position. She was still straddling the bench when he reached her.

"You alright?"

"Yeah. Just a few bumps and bruises. Nothing a hot shower, some ibuprofen and a nap won't cure."

Michael looked down at her midsection and cursed. He dropped his duffel bag and squatted beside her. "Good, Lord." He ran his fingers lightly over purple and blue blotches along her right rib cage.

She flinched at his touch. "It looks worse than it is. I bruise easily."

His fingers traced across her midsection. The pain of her bruises scattered, leaving a slow boil in its place. He smelled good. It wasn't the woody fragrance he usually wore. This scent smelled crisp and clean, with a little bit of citrus. His sporty fragrance, she thought. It made her want to get physical with him in a way that had absolutely nothing to do with sports.

“Maybe I should take you to the emergency room for x-rays.”

“No. Trust me. I've had much worse than this.”

He looked into her eyes as if trying to judge her forthrightness. “Yes, maybe you have. Doesn't mean we should ignore it. That push and shove match got intense. Covington came at you pretty hard. You should have let me take him.” Absently, he dropped his hand to a thigh covered by black spandex and rubbed as he spoke.

Jordis placed a hand on top of his to still its movement and quiet the tremors he'd set off in her nether region. “I fight my own battles, Remington. You need to remember that.”

“I gave you the lead today, *Morgan*, because you insisted. But, I'm not a man who stands by and lets his wo—...people be bullied. One day, Covington's going to cross a line with you that he finds me standing on the other side of. *You* need to remember *that*.”

He looked down at her hand. He frowned for a second before running an index finger over a polished nail. No French manicure graced her nails today. She wore only clear polish over her natural nails. He seemed to be fascinated by that. Was he wondering why she hadn't broken a nail? “Is something wrong?”

He looked into her eyes for a moment, searching for something. “No,” he said, taking a deep breath and rubbing a hand along the back of his neck. She recognized the move as a sign something bothered him. Whatever it was, he pushed it aside. “Where did you play?”

“Stanford. Lady Cardinal.” She smiled. “Conference champs three years in a row. NCAA/AIA champs my senior year.”

“Ah. That would explain the red jersey.” He placed his other hand on her opposite thigh and changed back to the topic she thought she had escaped. “If you’re alright, why were you lying in here half dressed?”

Her leg flexed under his touch. The movement made him look down. Jordis became conscious of her legs spread wide over the bench. Feeling exposed, she started to swing her far leg over so she could close her legs. Michael stopped her. He shifted his position so that he knelt on one knee, one hand still on each of her thighs.

“Answer my question, Jordis.”

Hyperaware of his hands on her thighs, Jordis found it difficult to speak. “I had a hard time getting my jersey off. I couldn’t bring myself to try for the rest.”

Michael looked at her sports bra, lingering long enough for her nipples to bead under his gaze. His voice dropped an octave. “I could help you with that.”

When his eyes returned to hers, they were that smoky gray that reminded her of storm clouds. The color of lust, she decided. The color, the look, the man—made her blood rush through her veins and pool in her sweet spot. She swallowed, trying to fight the dryness in her throat. With his hands so close to her swelling womanhood, all she could think about was letting him help her with that and a whole lot more.

In her silence, his hands slid up her legs. When they neared the crease where her legs joined her torso, she said his name in a breathless whisper.

* * *

The sound of Jordis's longing tapped the adrenaline in him that hadn't yet dissipated from the earlier ball game. The feelings of lust that had bombarded him when she'd strip off her sweats were still there. They were churning with the jealousy he'd felt when she'd flirted with McCormick and laced with the anger at Covington for manhandling her. He wanted her. He'd wanted her since the moment he'd seen her standing across the conference room that first day.

Chase's words came back to him. *You need to take care of that.* Yeah, he did.

His thumbs angled down towards the bench. As they crested, he slid his hands into the crease of her legs and rubbed both thumbs against her center. A gasped escaped her lips and her hands went immediately to his wrists. He ignored her hands and circled his thumbs against their prize. Without ceasing the motion of his thumbs, he leaned into her neck and kissed it. Her skin tasted salty after her workout on the court. The natural taste of her ratcheted up his desire. He swiped the tip of his tongue against her skin then nipped the spot with his teeth.

He felt her shutter and his satisfaction soared. She wanted him. She may not want to want him, but her body craved his touch as much as his craved hers.

He pulled back to check her eyes. He'd know for sure when he saw her eyes.

He smiled. Yep. They were that dark foresty green of desire she couldn't hide even when she could mask her emotions in other ways.

He moved one hand from the damp spot he'd created between her legs and grasped her by the neck. He kissed her deep and with longing.

Jordis pulled back from him. "What are you doing?"

"If you have to ask, I'm not doing it right."

"Michael, you can't possibly...I need a shower."

Michael's grin almost split his face. "Yeah, let me help you with that." His hands went to her waist and lingered at her midsection. He rubbed his palms against the slight indentations outlining her defined abdominals. "Who knew you were hiding all these muscles under those designer clothes? It's *damned* sexy."

Jordis gave a nervous laughed. Then, his hands moved to the elastic bottom of her sports bra and her breathing stopped.

He began to move the fabric up. "Why don't we get this off so I can see what else you been hiding under your Michael Kors."

Jordis's eyes widened and darted towards the shower stall then back towards the locker room door as she placed her hands on top of his to stop him. "You shouldn't be in here, Michael. I've got this."

"You couldn't do it alone before. What's changed?"

"I'll take a shower later."

"Don't you have to meet Ms. Gardner at the office soon?"

Jordis closed her eyes and sighed. She clearly hadn't factored in the client appointment.

"You can take a shower now." He removed her shoes and socks then stood and offered her his hand. "Come on." They stared at each other, motionless, his will bouncing against her stubbornness. Finally, he said, "Let me help you, Jordis." His voice a sultry tone that sounded more like bedroom coaxing than locker room chatter. "Trust me. I won't do anything you don't want me to do."

That's part of the problem, she thought. That left a whole lot of room based on her fantasies of late. Without saying a word or breaking eye contact, she eventually took his hand and stood.

He led her to the shower stall, leaned in and turned on the water, careful to adjust the temperature so that it wasn't too hot. He turned her so she faced the shower, her back to him. "Raise your arms."

A small grunt of pain escaped when she got her arms all the way up.

"Easy," he said. He pushed the lycra material up her sides, using all his will power not to brush her full breasts with his fingers as he lifted the material to free them.

After he pulled the bra straight up her arms and off, Jordis dropped her arms across her chest. He could tell she had some discomfort, but she hid it well, exhibiting the classic stoicism of a trained athlete. The job description of a champion necessarily included the ability to play hurt. Knowing she'd had a collegiate basketball career shed additional light on her personality. The drive, the discipline, the ability to take hits from an opponent but keep pressing forward were all skills she'd mastered playing ball.

"Now the bottoms," he said, trying not to focus on what was hidden beneath her crossed arms.

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Don't be crazy. Those I can definitely handle by myself."

Michael slid his hands to her waist. "You sure about that." His hands traveled around to her abdomen. Drops of water coated her skin, splattered from the shower spray. "I'd be happy to help."

Her eyes closed.

"Maybe I could even wash your back."

Her eyes opened. "Michael, enough." Her abdominals flexed beneath his palms.

“Enough? I haven’t even started yet.” He dropped his lips to her neck, alternating between nibbling and nipping. “I want you,” he whispered.

She shook her head in the negative, turning into his embrace. “No, Michael. I need you to back off.” Her voice trembled.

He put his arms around her, recognizing her entreaty for what it was—fear. She felt the pull between them like he did. They both knew where this was headed. It seemed almost inevitable. The only question was when. She’d told him no, but in that moment, he heard the truth. She was as afraid of her desires for him as he was afraid of his feelings for her.

Something loosened inside of him. The knots he’d been tied in for the past two weeks slid free of his gut and disintegrated. He didn’t want her to be afraid—not of him, not of anything ever again, because he genuinely cared for her. He didn’t just need to scratch an itch. He needed her in particular. Today, he wanted to set them both free, but this wasn’t the right time or the right place. The first time he made love to her would not be in a public gym shower or across some locker room bench. He intended to take his time and love her thoroughly, which deserved a bed or at least a rug in front of a fireplace.

He squeezed her tight. Her forehead rested against his chin. Even through his cotton T-shirt, he could feel the peaks of her naked breasts. She looked up at him, those kaleidoscope eyes hiding as much as they revealed. The gush of déjà vu rushed him so intensely that if he hadn’t been holding on to her, his knees might have given out.

Juliet. On the balcony. Her dress drooped to her waist. His arms braced around her as he shielded her from view. The feeling came so strong and so clear. He’d been right all along. There *was* something familiar about her. As she stood in his arms her height matching that of his Juliet,

he couldn't believe he'd been so preoccupied with finding differences between the two women that he'd overlooked that Jordis always wore heels. Until today, he'd never stood next to her in anything other than stilettos or platform heels. His hands began to tremble.

At first, his feelings for her had thrown him. It didn't make sense that he would have such a strong connection to two women in just a few weeks time. He'd questioned himself. Had his feelings for Juliet not been real? Had he been caught up in the moment? Had that bizarre otherworldly connection simply been alcohol induced? If his parents' romanticized notions of love at first sight and soul mates were true, no way should two different women make him feel this way at the same time. Then last night when she'd kissed him back, she'd done something with her tongue that he'd never experienced before except when Juliet had kissed him. He'd driven home with his memory flitting through every other time his brain had tried to connect Jordis with Juliet.

Everything he'd struggled with last night became clear. He knew her scent because he'd smelled it for the first time New Year's Eve. Her hands enthralled him with their long fingers and natural nails. The same natural nails he'd noticed on Juliet. She rolled her tongue inside his mouth the same way Juliet did when she got really turned on during a kiss because they were one and the same.

He let the knowledge wash over him, unsure what to do with it at the moment. He still held Jordis in his arms. Eventually, he moved his hands to her waist and turned her back towards the shower stall. Drawing the curtain closed behind her, he said, "Wash up, milady. I'll wait for you in the gym."

A loud clunk resonated from behind the curtain.

“Jordis, you alright?”

“Y-yes. I’m fine. Be done in a jiffy.”

Her voice sounded shaky. She’d obviously knocked something over, but he decided to let it go. He needed to focus on how he was going to handle this new development. Did she know he was the gladiator from New Year’s Eve? If not, he needed to handle this delicately. She’d made it clear that night that she didn’t want to see him again. That was no longer an option. In forty-eight hours, they’d be spending every workday together.

Chapter 11

Jordis sat in the dark Saturday night in front of her gas fireplace. She had the blower up high so that it mimicked a roaring log fire. She'd wrapped herself in a fleece throw and her hands around a mug of hot chocolate.

He'd called her "milady" this morning. Michael had called her "milady." Her shock at his use of the word had been so severe she'd accidentally pulled the body wash dispenser off the wall in the shower. She'd been leaning against it to steady herself as she tried to remove her shorts.

Only one other man had ever called her that—Spartacus. Her mind flashed back to New Year's Eve. What she remembered about him included olive skin, large hands, honeyed voice, and odd colored eyes. Eyes that she now suspected had been gray. Was it possible that her gladiator was actually Michael Remington? She'd been upset when she'd thought Michael had intruded on her midnight rendezvous dream. Now, it turned out he may have always been a part of it.

She thought about how the gladiator had followed her out to the taxi. He'd been persistent about wanting to see her again to pick up where they had left off. Did Michael know who she was? Had he known this whole time? Had this just been some kind of game to finish what he'd started? The thought made her melancholy. Surely, if he were her gladiator and had connected her to the masked ball, he would have said something to her about it. Maybe she was just being

paranoid.

Whatever the truth, the possibility that he was her gladiator made an already difficult situation more challenging. If he hadn't figured out who she was already, she certainly didn't want him to. She had a hard enough time dealing with her volatile attraction to him and getting him to recognize some boundaries. She didn't need him to connect her with the woman who made out with strangers on public balconies. It was time she took a stronger stance. Her playtime with Mr. Remington was over. Regardless of his pledge to find a way to handle their attraction to each other, she was letting him know on Monday morning that this flirtation between them was over.

Monday morning dawned bright and cold. Jordis got to the office early and sat at her desk finalizing notes from her Saturday conference with Ms. Gardner. Upon finishing her memo to file, Jordis stood to gather her paperwork. A movement at the corner of her eye made her look up. Eric Covington strode into her office and shut the door. Curious, she laid down her pen and leaned against the edge of her desk, crossing one foot over the other. "Eric, to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Eric propped himself against the door and gave her a charming smile. "Last week, I planned to come humbly before you this morning bearing an olive branch."

Jordis's eyebrows rose at the comment. "An olive branch?"

"Yeah. But it seems I may have underestimated you." He glanced toward the file on her desk with its label color-coded to indicate a pro bono matter. "Again."

"Really?" Sarcasm laced her voice. "In what way?"

"You're good. I'll give you that. I never thought you'd be able to play the sex card with

Michael Remington. He's known to be immune. Allison certainly hasn't had any luck throwing herself at him. But I guess every man has his weakness."

"Excuse you?" Jordis crossed her arms.

"No need to feign ignorance with me, Jordis. You and Remington looked mighty cozy together on the Plaza last Friday night." Eric laughed and pushed himself off the door. "I'd actually planned to apologize for my comments last week and for my behavior towards you in general. We got off on the wrong foot. Granted, we both want the partnership appointment at the end of the year, but I didn't think that meant we had to act like adversaries." He stopped in front of her.

"I've never considered you an adversary, Eric, except, of course, when you've made yourself one."

His hands went up in that gesture of truce he was famous for. "I know. I know. *Mea culpa*. I tend to be very competitive. It's just part of my nature. You shouldn't take it personally, especially since it seems that you and I are cut from the same cloth." He stepped closer.

Unease shimmied all over Jordis at his invasion of her personal space. "I'm not anything like you."

"No? So, you're saying I shouldn't be congratulating you on your new case assignment?"

Jordis smiled, but her eyes remained cool. "Why, Eric, I didn't think you were all that broken up about me being assigned the Gardner case, but thanks for the congratulations."

He walked over to the wall where her diplomas and awards hung. He glanced at her Stanford Law School diploma and then her certificate for Order of the Coif, that prestigious legal national honor society for the top ten percent of a graduating law class. He frowned and gave her a

curious look. Finally, he said, “You know I’m not talking about the Gardner case.”

“No? Then what are you talking about?”

“I’m asking if you used your considerable feminine assets,” his eyes scanned down her body, “to stack the deck in your favor for the Metra Pharmaceuticals second chair assignment.”

“Don’t insult me. I don’t trade sex for professional advancements.”

“No?”

“No. And accusing me of doing so is a long way from offering me an olive branch.”

“True,” Eric drawled. He studied her for another minute. “So it’s just a coincidence that you two happened to come out of the gym together Saturday morning as well?”

Jordis’s jaw clenched. The thought that Eric had waited outside to see when they’d left annoyed her. “He was just being a gentleman, Eric.” She looked pointedly at him. “You ought to try it sometime.” Her hands dropped to the desk beside her hips. “He didn’t want me to come out to an empty parking lot. I was a little slow getting dressed. Seems I had some sore muscles and bruises from being pounded on the basketball court.”

Eric made a face at her mention of bruises. “If that’s really the case, then I *will* apologize... for my past behavior and my insulting assumption.” He stepped back into her space. “Let me make it up to you.”

“Make it up to me how?” Skepticism moved in to dance with the unease still racing along her spine. Was he being sincere or was this a case of keep your friends close and your enemies closer? Her instincts shouted that he was up to something. She didn’t trust him.

“Why don’t you let me buy you lunch? Any restaurant you choose.”

She uncrossed her legs to stand and he stepped up to her, straddling her feet to prevent her

from rising. She stared at him blankly, incredulity making her momentarily numb.

“I’m serious,” he said. “I’d like us to start over.” He reached for her face.

Her hand went up automatically. “Eric, what are you—“

The opening of the door sounded behind him. Eric jumped away. The action and the expression on his face making him look guilty.

Michael Remington paused with his hand on the doorknob as he considered Eric. “Sorry to interrupt.” He glanced at Jordis. The look in his eyes was hard. It was the first time she’d seen him since Saturday and the current look in his eyes bore no resemblance to the look he’d had the last time she’d seen him. “Eric, I need to borrow Jordis for a meeting. It doesn’t seem as if you two were in the middle of anything important.”

“Just making plans to go out.” Eric headed for the door.

Jordis frowned at his comment. It was misleading. Why would he say something like that in front of Remington? She stood to correct him, but he interrupted her before she could.

“Jordis, I’ll catch you later.” He left, but not before giving her a meaningful glance behind Michael’s back.

When Eric was gone, Jordis looked at Michael. He watched her with an undecipherable look on his face. “Was there something you wanted to talk to me about, Michael?” She moved to put her desk between them.

“I came by to ask you to meet me and Chase in the East Conference Room in about fifteen minutes.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“We’ll talk about it in the conference room.” He turned abruptly and walked out, the

trademark Michael Remington brood gracing his face.

Jordis sat down for a moment. The residual testosterone level in the room from the Covington-Remington back-to-back encounters surged a little high for her liking. Eric Covington's moves had caught her off guard. Of all the behaviors she expected of him, making a pass at her wasn't one of them. She could just imagine what the scene looked like from Michael's perspective.

And Michael. What was with him? He'd seem upset about something. Was she in for an unpleasant surprise when she walked into the conference room? She rose, deciding not to put off the inevitable. On her way, she saw Allison and Eric chatting together a ways down the hall. They stopped talking at her appearance and stared at her quietly. She nodded and walked on. *So the gossip chain has started already*, she thought.

Jordis entered the East Conference Room to find Michael at the table in shirtsleeves. The light dusting of dark hair over his forearms made him look masculine and capable. His olive skin mimicked the perfect tan. The fact that she noticed all this annoyed her. She hadn't been summoned here for the Michael Remington Admiration Society. She was here for.... Well, she didn't know what she was here for, but she was about to find out.

"Jordis, have a seat," Chase said as Jordis strolled into the conference room.

Michael's eyes dropped to the gold stilettos she'd donned today. His lips curved up momentarily as if he were thinking of something amusing.

Jordis watched him. "Something wrong with my shoes?" she asked.

"Nope." The look he gave her could have melted ice in the Arctic. "No boots today?"

Trust me. The last thing I think about you doing in those boots is taking a stroll. The memory

combined with those sweltering eyes made her pulse pound. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was intentionally baiting with her. Buy why?

She kept her face and emotions neutral. She would not think about his large hands playing idly with his stylus or about how they had felt on her body last weekend. She was a professional. She would behave professionally. For now. Then she'd head straight home and have a date with BOB while she fantasized about olive skin and grey eyes. Screw that boss crap. She needed to get this itch scratched mechanically since she had no intention of letting him scratch it in the flesh. Eric's accusations had reinforced for her that she didn't have the luxury of indulging in any more hands-on activities where Michael Remington was concerned.

Chase took the lead on the conversation, oblivious to her mounting discomfort. Distracted by her wayward thoughts, she almost missed him say they wanted her to take his place on the Metra Pharmaceuticals case.

Yes! She gave a mental fist pump.

"I'll need you to work late tonight," Michael said, "so that we can sort out the key areas of the motion for summary judgment to address and divvy up the work to get it done."

The imaginary fist pump died. *Did he just say she had to work late with him?* Apprehension replaced elation. This couldn't be happening to her for the second time. Michael Remington wasn't one of those partners who passed out assignments and then expected a little late night appreciation. Was he? She'd put him off Saturday. Was this his way of making sure she went all the way with him?

Jordis looked at Chase. "Well, I'm happy to step in. I'd like some time to get up to speed on the documents before I start strategizing on the motion for summary judgment. Tomorrow

afternoon would be a better time for a strategy meeting.”

“You’ll be working closely with Michael now. I’ll let the two of you sort out the details. I just wanted to make myself available to you in case you had any initial questions that I might be able to answer.”

“No questions at this time. I’ll spend some time with the file today and let you know if anything comes to mind.” Jordis finally looked over at Michael. “Why don’t we convene tomorrow right after lunch? That’ll give me plenty of time to get up to speed on the facts and history of the case.”

“I’d prefer to start tonight,” Michael said.

Jordis hesitated. In the silence, a vibrating phone announced one of them had a call. Michael and Chase both checked the phone cases clipped on their belts.

Chase stood and said, “Excuse me.” He pulled out his phone as he stepped into the hall and closed the conference room door behind him.

As soon as the door closed, Michael asked, “Jordis do you have plans tonight?”

Plans? How was that any of his business? “Um, no. Why do you ask?”

“I’m just trying to figure out why you’re trying to avoid work tonight. I’d think after a key case appointment of this nature, you’d be anxious to prove yourself.”

“Prove myself how?” The question popped out before she could check herself.

Michael’s brow creased. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Jordis glanced at the door, but Chase was still outside. She dropped her voice to a half whisper. “Is this your way of ‘*handling it*’?”

“Handling what?”

Jordis took a deep breath. She didn't know whether to call him on his ploy to give them an excuse to work together or just be smart about avoiding situations that placed them together alone at late hours. She'd been here before. The last time a senior partner used a case assignment to get her alone she hadn't been able to extricate herself from the situation before things had gotten out of hand. She ended up having to fight—literally—her way out of a sticky situation and then had to deal with the backlash when the partner lied about what had happened between them. She really wanted this case, but it stuck in her craw that she'd gotten it because Michael Remington wanted to sleep with her. She had no doubt that's what had pushed her to the top of the list when word around the firm had Covington pegged as a shoe-in for top pick.

It didn't matter how bad she wanted this case. She wasn't slinking quietly into another *quid pro quo* situation where she'd be expected to put out to advance her career. She hadn't stood for it the first time and she wouldn't stand for it now. "You know, Michael, I expected different from you." Disgust laced her voice.

His jaw flexed, tension roiling off him in waves. "Why don't you stop talking in riddles, Ms. Morgan, and say what you mean?"

"Fine." She stood, anger forcing her chair back as she rose. She pressed her hands on the conference table and leaned towards him. "Just how are you expecting me to prove myself, Mr. Remington? With my brains or on my back?" she hissed.

His eyes flashed with sudden understanding. He shot up from his chair, an evil look on his face as he stalked towards her and said in a low mocking voice, "I don't know, Ms. Morgan. Which one are you better at?" Jordis had the good sense to back away from him, but he didn't stop. Once he'd backed her into the credenza holding the coffee setup, she had nowhere else to

go. “Well?”

She refused to be intimidated by him. She slid to her right, but he reached out and pulled her back in front of him.

“Where are you going, Jordis? You didn’t answer my question.”

Her breathing became shallow and labored. Her anger mounted, but her senses were being bombarded by the woody scent of his cologne. She couldn’t smell it without thinking of that kiss in the elevator or the feel of his hands under her coat Friday night. He was overpowering her with his sex appeal and by the smirk on his face, he knew it. Her emotional gears shifted from angry to pissed. Two could play that game.

She drew a finger down the line of buttons on the front of his shirt and said in a sultry voice. “Lucky for you, I’m great at both.” She leaned into him. “Which one were you planning to take advantage of?”

Satisfaction rose in her chest when she felt his hand flex against her waist and heard his sharp intake of breath. It was short lived, however, when he pressed his hips against her and said in an angry growl, “Which one are you offering?”

She felt his arousal against her abdomen, but it wasn’t lust in his eyes. He looked like he wanted to throttle her.

“And are you planning to put out right here or do I have to take a number behind Covington?”

She flinched as if he’d struck her. “*Bastard!*” The word burst from her mouth and her hands flew to his chest. “Get off me!”

He grabbed her wrists. “You know, sweetheart, I’ve been at this game a long time. No one

calls into question my integrity without being able to back it up. Make no mistake. I want you. I want you bad. But I don't make professional decisions with my dick. So, the next time you think you're currying favor with me because I want to stick mine in you. Remember, I'd never risk my reputation or the future of this firm on a piece of tail, not even one as mouthwatering as you."

"Michael!" Chase stood in the doorway, a look on his face comprised of equal parts horror, surprise and ire.

Michael released Jordis's hands abruptly and she tottered a bit to the side before gaining her balance. She glared up at him fists balled tightly at her sides, using all her energy not to punch him and to swallow words she desperately wanted to say, but would surely end her career at RHF. She turned to leave, back straight, fists still clenched.

Right before she reached the door, Michael called after her. Jordis stopped, but didn't turn around.

"You have all afternoon to review what you feel you need to review. I'll expect you back here at six o'clock. Don't worry about dinner. I'll have something brought in."

She exited, shutting the door with a force only a few decibels below a slam.

* * *

Michael growled and shoved the silver tray holding coffee condiments and stirrers off the credenza onto the floor with one swipe. "Dammit!"

Chase looked at the mess on the floor. "Did that help?" He shook his head as Michael stormed over to the window. Whatever was happening between Michael and Jordis, his old friend was becoming completely undone. "What the *hell* is wrong with you?" he asked, as if he didn't already know the answer.

“It’s her.”

“Jordis? Well, duh, Sherlock.”

“No. Juliet.”

“Juliet?” Chase scowled at his friend’s back. “Michael, don’t you think you have enough to worry about with your feelings for Jordis? You really think you need to hang onto this fixation with Juliet?”

“You don’t understand.” Michael turned to face him. “She *is* Juliet.”

“What? You’re kidding right? You don’t honestly think Jordis Morgan is your mystery woman?”

“Yeah, I do.” Michael ran his fingers through his hair. “It’s been driving me crazy from the moment I met her, this nagging feeling that I knew her from somewhere. Then I...” His voice trailed off.

“Then you what?”

Michael took a deep breath, looked squarely at Chase and said, “I kissed her.”

Chase stared at him a moment then one side of his mouth quirked. “You kissed her?”

Michael was glad someone found this funny. “Yeah. Twice.”

Chase stepped over the coffee service mess on the floor and leaned against the credenza. “Let me get this straight. You believe Jordis is your elusive mystery woman. You’ve kissed her twice. And then you called her a “piece of tail” as your way of moving this budding romance to the next level?”

Right. Stupid. Michael shook his head. “No, I just—” He grabbed his hair and sat down in a conference table chair. “Ugh! That woman is driving me out of my mind. I dream about her. I

start out dreaming about Juliet, but by the time the dream is over, she's changed into Jordis."

"And because of this morphing dream, you believe Jordis is Juliet?"

"It's more than that."

"Okay." Chase walked over and sat down perpendicular to him. "Tell me about it."

Michael ran Chase through his encounters with Jordis thus far. When he'd finished, Chase glanced at the door through which Jordis had departed. "How does Jordis feel about this?"

"I don't know. We haven't discussed it."

"Why not?"

"Well, if you remember, as Juliet, she didn't want me to know her real name. Given her stance on a relationship with her supervising attorney, I'm doubtful she'll be thrilled to learn the truth."

"She's right about the supervising attorney issue. You need to get that resolved if you're serious about pursuing this."

"I can't ask her to step down from the Metra case because I'm attracted to her. That'd be a disaster not to mention a potential lawsuit."

"True. But, if you both want this relationship to continue, then you could mutually agree that Jordis take a different case assignment or transfer to another department. She's got as much transactional experience as litigation. She'd be great in Business and Finance. I'm sure Roy would love to have her." Chase laughed loudly at the look on Michael's face. "Down, boy! I didn't mean it *that* way. Roy is a lot of things, but he wouldn't step on another man's toes, especially not a friend. Boy, you've got it bad!"

Chase was right. He had it bad. When he'd walked in on Jordis with Covington something

vicious and green had crawled onto his back and he hadn't been able to shake it loose. "You don't understand."

Chase rose and put a hand on Michael's shoulder. "I understand better than you know. I once dated a girl who turned me inside out like that." Chase headed for the door.

Michael swiveled his chair towards Chase's departing frame. "What did you do?"

Chase stopped and turned. He looked at Michael pointedly and smirked. "Think about it for a minute." When Michael's eyes finally widened in a startled face, Chase chuckled. "Yeah, I married her."

* * *

Michael stopped outside the East Conference Room on Wednesday afternoon and stared through the door at Jordis working silently at the conference room table. He was surprised to see her there. He'd been trying to catch her alone the last two days to apologize, but she hadn't been anywhere to be found. She'd shown up to meet with him Monday evening about the motion for summary judgment, but the air had been tense and she'd rebuffed his attempts to talk about anything other than the case.

He'd left her a message earlier today to let her know that the plaintiff's had amended their motion for summary judgment and he wanted to talk to her about some factual information that had appeared in the amended version. He hadn't actually expected her to show up. He should have known better. Jordis was always the consummate professional. No matter her personal disagreements with him, she would never let it affect her service to a client.

He stepped into the conference room and closed the door. Leaning against it, he said, "You've been avoiding me."

Jordis didn't turn around or speak.

"Jordis?"

"I'm here now. Let's get to work." She finished sorting the piles of documents she had before her and finally looked over at him. "I read through your notes. I agree that counsel for the plaintiff must have found some smoking gun amongst our discovery documents to have taken such an aggressive stance in the revised motion for summary judgment."

Jordis leaned over the table and sorted through a pile of folders on the far side of the table. He closed his eyes as her luscious bottom pointed towards him. The enticing image made him want to step up behind her and lift her skirt. He needed to make peace with her. That wouldn't happen if he let his baser emotions get the better of him. "I've been thinking of little else," *other than you*, "since they rescinded their settlement offer two weeks ago. Something has changed to make them think they have the upper hand and we need to figure out what it is."

The gruff sound of his voice made Jordis turn to look at him. He ran a hand through his nearly black hair, giving it a tousled look. The look of frustration on his face and the slight unruliness of his hair should have made him look unkempt and forbidding, but on Michael Remington it looked downright sexy. Jordis pushed that thought from her head and placed her attention back on the files stacked on the conference table. She had managed to concentrate on the documents until he'd entered the room. His scent, woody and masculine, made her want to crawl into his arms, snuggle her face against his neck and breathe him in all night and into the next morning. Not exactly a wise train of thought for a woman who knew the man she lusted after thought of her as simply a *piece of tail*.

Unaware of her predicament, Michael moved up against her side, placing his left hand at the

small of her back. Leaning against her and reaching towards the stack of folders she'd placed aside, he said, "No, take a look at these. These were in the last batch of documents the defendants sent over. Interestingly, the file room managed to misplace them for over a week after they arrived."

"A week?" Her surprise was obvious. "Where were they finally located?"

"In the file room, misfiled a few cases over. I thought it rather suspicious when they turned up basically in plain sight. And, they weren't the only documents missing at the time. Two boxes of attorney-client privileged documents belonging to our client were missing at the same time."

She leaned on the table. "Let me guess. Those two boxes of documents managed to show up at the same time as the missing discovery documents."

"Exactly."

As he directed her to the first folder, his palm brushed against the back of her hand. He went still, suddenly hyperaware of the feel of her skin against his palm and the curve of her hip pressed against his. He let his hand trail slowly past her wrist and up her forearm. Jordis pulled back from him, but Michael rested his hand against her far hip to keep her close.

"Michael, don't," she said. "We're at the office. We need to focus." She broke his hold and placed herself out of his reach.

He blew out a long breath. "Yeah. Focus," he said, stepping away from the table. He watched her. "I can't focus very well when I'm around you."

She scowled at him. "Well, you need to get over it."

"Is it really that easy for you to turn it on and off?"

"Yeah, it's that easy." She looked away so that he couldn't see the lie in her eyes. "Did you

call this meeting to address the revised motion or to discuss our personal issue?”

“Both.”

“Well, since we’re on the client’s time at the moment, how about we stick to the case?” She stepped around the table and sat down where she’d spread out her personal case notes. “Your message said you were concerned about possible foul play. What did you mean?”

Michael sighed. He wasn’t going to get anywhere on the personal front so he might as well buckle down and focus on the case. “I left you a copy of the revised motion where I highlighted factual allegations and legal theories which appear based upon attorney-client privileged information.”

Jordis looked up quickly. “You think plaintiff’s attorneys had access to the temporarily missing documents?”

“Or they had access to the database where we store electronic copies of all case documents. I’ve asked the IT department to look into whether the firm database has been accessed by any unauthorized users, but it will take a couple of weeks for them to do a thorough evaluation.”

“We don’t have a couple of weeks.” Jordis stood and reached for the conference call setup in the middle of the table. “I think I can do better than that.” She dialed a number and pulled a microphone/speaker satellite towards herself and slid one towards Michael. A deep voice answered on the other end, “Brandt Morgan.”

“Hey, bro. I need your help with something and I have you on speakerphone with my boss. So, behave.”

“Which boss is that?” Brandt asked. “The arrogant, domineering jerk or the prince of a guy with the charming wife and precocious five year-old?”

Staring at Jordis's mortified face, Michael responded, "Michael Remington here, Brandt. I believe I would be the arrogant, domineering jerk."

Jordis bit her lip as she tried to hide a smile. Michael continued to watch her and she shrugged at him.

Brandt laughed. "It's a pleasure to meet you by phone, Michael. What can I do for you guys?"

Jordis leaned towards the speakerphone. "Michael thinks someone may be tapping into our case database and accessing privileged documents."

"I think it may be more than just case documents, Brandt," Michael added. "I don't keep my strategy notes or work product on the main database. I have a separate electronic system for those, but I believe our opponents may have had access to those as well."

"Oh, so we're going on spy mission," Brandt said, his voice dripping with glee.

Jordis shook her head at the excitement in her brother's voice. "You are such a geek."

"And proud of it. Jordis, do you have your laptop handy?" Brandt asked her.

"Yeah, sure," she said as she leaned over and pulled her laptop out of her portfolio.

"I have remote access set up on your laptop. Let's get down to business."

They worked through issues with Brandt as he scouted around the firm network. After a few hours of conferencing and troubleshooting, they had a pretty good idea of how the opponent's had gotten access to privileged documents. Michael made arrangements for Brandt to liaise with the firm's IT group so he could gather more detailed ISP information, but it looked like someone in the firm had set up an external gateway that allowed back door entrance into the firm network. With a little more digging, they would have what they needed to put a stop to the mole and file a

complaint against adverse counsel.

When they ended the call with Brandt, Jordis gathered her notes from the table. “I think we’ve covered enough ground tonight. I need a break and some dinner.”

Michael stretched, “Yeah. Me too.”

“I’ll look at this some more tomorrow and let you know if I find anything else of note.”

“Jordis, now that we’re off the client’s time, let’s talk.”

She shook her head and shouldered her tote. “No need.”

“I *need* to apologize to you for what I said to you on Monday.”

“Apology accepted. Now let’s move on.” She headed for the door.

He reached for her, but she snatched her arm away. “Don’t.”

“Jordis, wait. Please. I really am sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” He huffed out a breath. “That’s not true.”

Jordis stood staring at him... waiting.

“Jordis, I...” He felt like an idiot having to admit what had truly been going through his mind. Instead, he stated simply, “I was angry.”

“I figured that much out on my own.”

“No, I mean, when I walked in and saw you with Covington, I—“

“You assumed I was making out with him only days after my interlude with you.”

He grimaced at her directness. “Yes.”

She gave him a smarmy look. “What’s the matter Michael? Did it bother you that I may not be completely bowled over by your charms? Were you jealous?”

“Yes!” he snapped through clenched teeth. The look of surprise on her face emboldened him.

“Dammit, Jordis. Yes, I was jealous. I didn’t know what to do with that. I’m not usually a jealous man. I don’t get possessive over women. But for some reason with you, I feel both. I don’t know what to do with that.”

“We’re colleagues, Michael. Nothing more. You’re my supervising attorney and I’ve been handed a case that will pretty much make my career here as long as we’d don’t screw it up. So, there’s really nothing for you to do with that except maybe let it go.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Let’s be clear.” Her voice grew hard. “I want you, too. Bad. But I want this partnership more than I want your d—...*member* in me. So, this piece of tail is going home so that both of us can keep our integrity intact.” She strode to the door, ignoring his flinch at her words and missing the look of pain that crossed his face. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Michael.”

Michael watched her go, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He pondered her words. So much for them both wanting this relationship to continue. She’d made her position clear. Her priority was using this case to cement her selection to partnership. Her career took precedence over any personal relationship with him. The one time it would have been to his benefit to have a woman use him to try and further her career, he ended up with an ambitious associate with ethics. Somehow, he had to show her that surrendering to her heart was as important as advancing her career. She’d said she’d see him tomorrow. Good. He was through with subtle efforts to win her attention. Tomorrow started the full-out campaign to thaw the deep freeze she’d place around her heart. She’d thought he’d been arrogant and domineering before. She hadn’t seen anything yet.

Chapter 12

The next evening, Jordis entered Michael's office cranking her neck from side to side. She hadn't meant to work so late today on the reports from the plaintiff's prior two expert witnesses, but something had seemed off to her and she needed to make sense of it before she went home. She'd compiled a few notes for Michael to read. She wanted him to read them when he first arrived in the morning so she'd leave them on his chair where he couldn't miss them.

She dropped the papers on the chair and reached for the pull chain of his still lit desk lamp. *I guess the cleaning people missed this one.* As she turned to leave, her eyes fell on a masculine body sprawled on the office couch. Head propped against the couch arm, Michael lay shadowed beneath unlit recessed lighting.

Jordis stepped over to the leather sofa, her bare feet soundless on the lush Berber carpet. She'd abandoned her stilettos in her office and hadn't bothered to put them back on for the short walk to Michael's office. She hadn't expected anyone else to still be here.

She perused the coffee table adjacent to the couch and took in miscellaneous papers, various ballpoint pens and several highlighters scattered about. She picked up a page from the table and glanced over the sheet. He'd made notes in the margin questioning the source of certain facts.

She looked over at Michael. One arm draped over his chest. The other was caught between his body and the back of the sofa. She allowed her eyes to travel down the length of his body, enjoying an unobserved opportunity to appreciate his physique. He'd kicked off his dress shoes

made of soft Italian leather and rested in black sock-covered feet. One foot was up on the cushions with knee bent against the back of the couch and the other rested on the ground.

Goodness, he was sexy. Even in his sleep, he radiated a sex appeal that made her long to climb onto the couch and stretch out on top of him. She'd always had a thing for tall athletic men and Michael had that in spades not to mention a confidence and intelligence that made him almost irresistible. But, resist him she must. Nothing was more important to her right now than making partner. She couldn't let anything distract her—not jealous colleagues, not worries about masked interludes with strangers and certainly not an affair with a senior partner.

She hadn't spoken to Michael all day. She'd tried to hold onto her fury. It would be so much easier to avoid a liaison with him if they were at odds with each other. After thinking through what he'd said during his apology, however, she hadn't been able to hold onto her anger. While his assumption about Eric had been insulting, she knew from Michael's position at her office door it had probably looked like she and Eric had been kissing or about to kiss. In hindsight, she'd figured that was exactly what Eric had wanted Michael to think. What better way to eliminate competition from the boss's presumed paramour than to make the boss think she was two-timing him? Thus, he'd destroy the boss's motivation to give the paramour preferential treatment.

Michael admitted that he'd been jealous. Try as she might to ignore that, the woman in her felt flattered. Plus, she couldn't ignore her own behavior. She'd accused him of using his position to pressure an associate into having sex with him. Not a very favorable comment on his character. She'd let the baggage from her prior firm affect her thinking and she'd painted him with the same brush as the lowlife that had harassed her. He hadn't deserved that.

She stood next to his head. If she reached out, she could touch his hair. She knew she shouldn't. She should just turn and walk out, but her fingers itched. How many times had she daydreamed about running her fingers through those dark locks?

She leaned a small ways over the couch, checking to make sure he was still asleep. His eyes were closed and his chest rose and fell evenly. He seemed knocked out.

She lifted her hand, inched it towards his head then hesitated. She could hear the blood rushing in her ears, heart pounding. Could she touch him softly enough not to wake him? *Walk away, Jordis. Just walk away.*

Despite the warning voice inside her head, she inched her fingers the rest of the way. They flitted lightly over the hair on the very top of his head. She ran a few strands through her thumb and forefinger. His hair was thick, but it had a silkiness to it. Her touch grew bolder as she pushed her fingers lightly into the hair near his ear and stroked them through the ends of his hair. Her breathing changed. The feel of his hair beneath her fingers set her blood pulsing through her veins and she realized she wanted to touch more than his hair. She'd just been curious. She had no idea that touching him so casually would have this effect on her. She needed to get out of here before he woke up.

She glanced at his face and froze. His eyes were open. His gazed locked on her face. Slowly, as if inching away from a rabid wolf, she removed her hand. In an unhurried move, he captured her wrist before she was more than an inch away.

“Don't stop now.” His husky voice slithered along her spine and further stirred her roiling hormones.

“I'm sorry.” Her voice was a whisper. “I didn't mean to disturb you, but it's late. Don't you

want to go home?” She tried to play off her intimate ministrations with feigned concern for his wellbeing.

“I think things are a lot more interesting right where I am.” His grip tightened on her wrist as she sought to withdraw it from his hand. “Where are you going?”

“Like I said, it’s late. I need to go.”

“Do you?” A clear challenge reverberated in his voice. He glanced at the pulse point on her wrist. “I think you need something else.” He heard her draw in a quick breath. His meaning hadn’t been lost on her. “Come here, Jordis.” He pulled her gently, like an experienced fisherman reeling in an easy catch. Slow and steady, he drew her the last few inches to the couch.

She stood next to him, her breasts in line with his head. He eased to a sitting position, drawing her between his spread legs. He released her wrist and slid his hands around her back, underneath the hem of her untucked shirt. He rubbed his fingers along her bare lower back then up her spine until he reached the clasp of her bra. He looked up into her eyes, releasing the catch.

The prospect of his hands on her breasts made her lower parts swell and dampen. Despite the telltale signs of her labored breathing, she made a half-hearted attempt to stop the madness.

“Michael,” she panted, “we can’t do this.”

He spread his hands wide along her back. They remained like that for a moment, wordless, just breathing. Then, his thumbs began to move in an arc, easing around her sides until they reached the swell of her breasts. Every muscle in Jordis’s body locked up. His thumbs continued to the undercurve of each breast, mapping their circumference in anticipation of a more thorough exploration. He stared at the center of her chest as if he could see through the material of her blouse to the naked flesh below or could make the buttons open with his mind.

“When you touched my hair, I could feel it all over.” His voice remained low and husky. “It was as if you pulsed with electricity and sent a charge through my entire body. What would it take for me to make you feel that way?” With that, he glanced up into her eyes and rolled his thumbs across her pebbled nipples.

She moaned.

“Tell me what you want, Jordis.” She started to pull away. He stopped her. “Don’t run from me this time.”

The thumbs worked over her nipples back the other direction. She stifled a whimper. She was definitely feeling the charge now. The excitement forced her to breathe through her mouth. “Don’t play games with me, Michael.”

“Trust me. The play I have in mind doesn’t have anything to do with games.” He pressed a kiss above the first button of her blouse then slid his tongue in light circles against her sternum. One hand released a breast and began to unbutton her blouse. “Jordis, I need to taste you tonight. Tell me what you need.”

Her hands went to his arms, squeezing his biceps. “This is a mistake.”

“It doesn’t feel like a mistake. *You* don’t feel like a mistake.”

Jordis wanted to stop him...intellectually. Physically, she needed to feel his mouth on her. She was a successful career woman, financially independent, sexually self-aware—everything women’s magazines touted as the modern-day Superwoman—but Michael Remington was evidently her Kryptonite.

Tell me what you need.

Did he know? Did he suspect that she was his for the taking? She hadn’t given herself to him

yet, but it didn't matter. She was his. He owned her soul no matter how much she tried to retain it for herself. He had crawled inside her and branded her as his.

She leaned her breast further into his hand. Closing her eyes, she shut off her thoughts and allowed herself to enjoy his hand caressing her breast and his lips against her skin. *What did she need?* She needed to be tasted as much as he claimed he needed to taste. She slid her hands up his arms and pushed her fingers into the hair at the base of his neck. Her grip pressed his face against her chest, encouraging him to abandon the sampling and head for the feast. He opened her blouse, pushed up her loose bra and angled his mouth across her dark aureole, kissing his way over to his ultimate destination. When he slid his mouth onto the nipples peak, Jordis sighed. Exquisite pleasure feathered through her breast.

His large hands squeezed tighter around her waist. He pulled her closer. One hand gripped her tightly. The other hand climbed her back to wrap around the back of her neck. He pressed her closer still then he turned her and laid her on the couch. He dropped his head and kissed her slowly. His tongue eased into her mouth and touched the tip of hers. When she moaned, he placed a hand on the side of her head to hold her steady. He tilted her face a little to the left so he had a better angle to plunder her mouth.

He ran his hands down her sides, along her hips until he reached the hem of her skirt. He started pushing the skirt slowly up her thighs. When he looked down, he saw his hands trembling. How many times had he fantasized about what hid under her skirt, wanting to feel her, wanting to touch her?

She braced her hands on his wrists. A knot formed in his stomach. If she stopped him now, he wouldn't survive it.

“Jordis?”

“We can’t do this here, Michael.”

He glanced over at his open office door. “There’s no one here but us.”

“You can’t know that.”

Yes, he could. He had checked earlier with security after walking the halls. He’d known she was still in her office buried under deposition transcripts and expert witness reports for their case. He’d stopped at her door to shoo her home when he realized it had started to snow, but she had looked so intense that he’d decided to let her work in peace. He’d stayed at the office tonight for that reason alone. She was still driving that damn sports car, taking her chances that the winter would stay mild. He hadn’t been able to leave knowing she’d be alone in the building and possibly get snowed in. He’d come back to his office to strategize more on his portion of their response to the motion for summary judgment. “Yes, I can. I checked. Everyone left hours ago. You and I were the only ones left except for the cleaning crew and they all leave by twelve thirty.”

His hands moved again, continuing their attempted unveiling. Jordis pushed hard against his wrists. “Michael, please.” For a moment, she thought he was going to ignore her. She had decided to give in to her needs, but she wasn’t wanton enough to make this a possible exhibition.

“Let me lock the door.” He moved as if to rise, but she stopped him.

“I can’t. Not here.”

He let out a long, slow groan. “Lady, you do realize that you worked until there were piles of snow on the ground? No one is crazy enough to still be here, but you.”

She placed her hands on either side of his face and said, “Then take me home.”

He dropped his forehead against hers and sighed.

She smiled to herself then lifted his head and kissed him. Really kissed him, without reserve. She slid her tongue across his sensuous lips before sliding it inside his mouth. Taking a page from his book, she tilted his head so she could really enjoy her explorations. There would be no more pretense on her part. She wanted him badly and she wanted him to know it. Everyone already thought she was sleeping with him. If she was going to be the subject of gossip, she might as well reap the actual benefits of the torrid affair she was accused of having. With that in mind, she kissed him until they were both at a place where the only logical next step was to remove all their clothes. Then, she placed her hands on either side of his face again, looked up at him with hooded eyes, and said slowly in a husky voice that made clear her intent, "Take. Me. Home. Michael."

* * *

Jordis was laughing so hard she was practically hyperventilating by the time they reached her apartment. Michael had pulled her by the hand so fast outside her feet had slid across the snowed pavement on her heeled boots as if she were wearing skis.

He grabbed the keys from her hand and unlocked the door. He dragged her inside, relocked the door, and threw her keys on the table in the entrance. His back went against the door and he pulled her to him. "You know, I don't appreciate you laughing at me."

"I can't help it. Were you in a bit of a hurry, Remington?"

"Yes. Still am." He kissed her. Lips and tongues dueled, both of them so hot they could spontaneously combust. He pulled his mouth away from hers. "I promised myself that the first time I made love to you, I'd take my time and love you so thoroughly you'd scream my name

over and over. But, right now, I'm so on edge. I just want you hard and fast."

She dropped her coat to the floor and leaned her body against his. Sliding her hands inside his coat, she pressed two wet kisses against his lips. "I tell you what, Remington. Hard and fast works for me." She slid one hand down to rub the sizable bulge at the front of his pants.

"Provided, you still make me scream your name over and over."

Michael immediately flipped her so that she was the one with her back against the door. "What the lady wants. The lady gets." He placed a hand under her chin and lifted her head up, dropping his open mouth against hers. His tongue slid in and out while his hand went simultaneously to the wall, searching for a light switch. He needed to see her face clearly when she offered him hard and fast. "Lights?"

She reached towards the wall opposite the one he'd searched and flipped a switch that illuminated the entryway in soft yellow light.

He glanced at her eyes, which were way past deep green, but not quite brown. He'd never seen that shade on her before. If it went with the hungry look on her face, it was a color he intended to inspire often.

He pulled off his coat and dropped it next to hers. His hands found the side of her thighs and inched up the straight skirt that accentuated her curves so well. When he got it high enough to slip a hand between her legs, his right hand went in search of the Promised Land. Her groan of satisfaction let him know when he'd found it. Tiny strings and a miniscule triangle of fabric gave him ready access to what he wanted. He slipped a finger inside the barely there underwear. The dampness he encountered forced him to concentrate on his breathing to prevent a premature end to an evening he planned to make last for several more hours. When he found his control, he

asked, “Why do women bother to put on these little pieces of nothing?”

Breathing with difficulty, she said, “Because clothing that properly displays our figures doesn’t look half as good with undergarment bulges and panty lines. Are you complaining?”

“Hell, no.” A complaint was the furthest thing from his mind. “Pull your blouse out of your skirt for me.” She complied. He pressed the finger inside her thong inside her. Her head fell back against the door. “Now, unbutton it.”

Her fingers unfastened the buttons as quickly as her unfocused mind would allow. Once she was done, he dropped his head to her neck to nibble his way across her collarbone. He stopped at the two bumps at the center of her neck, sucking gently in a way that made her clench around his finger. He smiled to himself. He’d just found one of her erogenous zones. He filed the information away for later exploration.

He looked up, loving the picture before him. He slid one bra strap down as far as her open blouse would allow and used a finger to pull the cup down off a lovely breast. He put his finger in his mouth, pulled it out and rubbed her nipple with the wet tip. He watched it bead for him and goose bumps form along her chest.

While he played with her exposed nipple and her unexposed bud of desire, her eager hands got insistent against his hardened package. His heavy breathing mingled with hers. The tinkle of his belt buckle echoed around the dim room as Jordis undid his belt and slid it free of his belt loops. When she unbuttoned his pants and freed his member, he removed his hand from its nipple play and grabbed both her wrists with one hand. “*Bellezza*, you need to let me drive or I’m going to embarrass myself.”

“You can drive all you want, *caro mio*. I just want a chance to check out the merchandise.”

She smiled at the surprised look of pleasure on his face.

“You’ve been studying Italian?”

“I just looked up a few words. I got tired of not knowing what you were calling me and you didn’t seem to want to tell me. Sweetheart sounds so much more romantic in Italian.”

He chuckled. “You know something?”

She shook her head from side to side.

“I think I may be in way over my head with you.” He kissed her deeply. “You sure about that hard and fast?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Good.” He added another finger to her core and immediately increased the tempo of his attention.

Her hips began to move in response and sexy vocalizations hovered in her throat.

Michael grabbed his wallet from his back pocket. Not wanting to stop his manual stroking, he flipped it open with one hand and held it up to her. “Grab a packet for me, *cara mia*.”

She smiled at his intentional use of the Italian endearment and quickly pulled two linked condoms from his wallet. Not waiting for instructions she immediately tore a packet open with her teeth. He laughed.

She held the packet out to him. “I’d help you out, but I wouldn’t want you to embarrass yourself.”

Still laughing softly, he flipped the wallet behind him. A thud and jangle of keys indicated that it landed on the entryway table.

“Impressive,” she said.

Sheathing himself with all due haste, he replied, “Baby, you ain’t seen nothing yet.” He yanked her skirt up past her hips, pulled aside her black triangle and slid into paradise.

They both let out a long deep moan, but he didn’t stop to savor it. He lifted one of her legs and started pumping. Male gluteus muscles flexed repeatedly in a steady rhythm that made her PC muscles clinch in complement. He grasped her tightly around the waist, pulling her tighter to him, and lifted her leg higher so he could seat himself deeper. Their tempo and breathing accelerated until their bodies beat a steady knock against the door. A keening sound started low in her throat letting him know he was in the right spot.

“Michael!”

“I know baby. Stay with me just a few minutes longer.”

Her erotic keen grew louder. He didn’t think it was possible, but he suddenly felt thicker inside her. The increased tightness of her sheath intensified his pleasure to the point of pain. He tapped down the primitive yowl building inside him and worked it out between her thighs.

“Yes,” she cried. “More.” He gave her more. Her voice rose an octave, his name getting shriller by the second.

“More?” he asked.

“Yes!”

The knocking on the door grew fiercer, a rapid aural pulse playing like a possessed metronome to their sexual tune. Her pants mixed with his. A solo groan harmonized periodically with the percussive breathing and name calling rounded out the melody. The tune played over and over, louder and louder, until she was nearly screeching his name in a subdued repetitious cry meant to keep her neighbors from hearing more of the show than they probably already had.

When her voice waivered in a tone that suggested tears were as close as her orgasm, he gave two long, deep thrusts and commanded, “Let go, baby. Let it go.”

The spasms against his staff followed immediately, pulling his release out to meet hers. He dropped his mouth to her lips in a kiss meant to capture the wail he knew she was losing the battle to hold back and to keep himself from emitting his own shout of ecstasy, which he suspected would come out more like the squeal of a ten-year-old girl. He was whipped and he was thinking of a particular kind of whipped that came in a compound word and followed the offensive word for kitty. He’d always hated that expression. He never understood it. In his other life, nowhere in the world could a man find sex good enough to surrender his soul. He’d been enlightened at the school of Jordis and his reincarnated psyche seeped into and displaced the jaded shell formerly housed in his physical being.

He released her leg and pulled her close as they came back to themselves. His heart was beating frantically from his workout, but his spirit was completely at ease. She didn’t know it yet, but he had no intention of ever letting her get away.

He kissed her again, tasting her mouth from corner to corner before he asked, “Do you know what *bellezza* means?”

She gave him a soft smile and nodded in the affirmative.

“What?”

“Beauty.”

“And that you are.” And he proceeded to show her just how beautiful he thought she was from the front door to the living room couch to the hallway wall.

* * *

When they finally reached her bedroom, Jordis's limbs felt like jelly. She didn't think she could take any more pleasure. He'd removed her blouse, bra, skirt and boots along the way. They'd been left behind like a trail of bread crumbs leading back from a den of iniquity. She lay before him wearing nothing but the black lacy thong he'd commented on earlier. When he crawled up her body from the bottom of the bed and kissed her inner thighs, her eyes closed. With a satisfied groan, she grabbed his head and pulled him up for a kiss.

"Hey, what are you doing? I wasn't finished down there," he said.

Her cheeks dimpled. "Darling, if you give me one more orgasm, I'm going to die of heart failure."

"How about just a small one?" He placed his thumb and index finger centimeters apart in front of her face as a visual aid.

If he were half as good with his tongue downtown as he was with the part of his anatomy that made him male, there would be nothing small about any orgasm he gave her. She laughed. "You were wrong before." At his perplexed expression, she continued, "I'm the one who's way out of my league with you. You're insatiable."

The corners of his mouth lifted and he placed a kiss along the top of one breast. "You're delicious. You can't fault me for being gluttonous when I with you." He placed his hands at her hips and pulled the strings of the tiny thong down her legs. Now they were both completely naked. He reached for the condom he'd thrown on the bed before she'd collapsed into it.

Her eyes widened. "You can't be serious?"

He kissed her softly. "Don't worry. This time I'll take it nice and slow. You don't have to do anything, but let me enjoy you."

Her smile was as liquid as her limbs. When he looked at the condom packet and frowned, she asked, “Something wrong?”

“I should have taken you to my place.”

“Why?”

“This is my last condom. I only had four in my wallet.”

She wanted to laugh at his childish pout. Her heart fluttered as the image of what his son would look like when he didn’t get his way flashed through her mind. She went emotionally soft inside and she suddenly needed to feel him inside her again. “Don’t worry about it.” She reached for the handle of the drawer to the bedside table but her arms couldn’t quite reach.

He leaned slightly and slid it open for her. He quickly looked back at her when he saw the box of condoms inside. His expression went from surprised to relieved to perplexed in a matter of seconds.

Remembering his comment about being jealous and possessive for the first time in his life, Jordis explained. “It’s a new box.” He just stared at her quietly. “And the first I’ve needed since I gave Keith back his ring.”

That made him smile. “God, I love a woman smart enough to be prepared.”

He slid on his last condom. Jordis pulled a small white remote control from under her pillow, clicked a button and sighed as he slid into her to the sound of John Legend crooning *Tonight (Best You Ever Had)*. She set the song to loop repeatedly. She lost track of how many times it played as the man she loved made slow, passionate love to her. When they were both spent, she set the music to time itself off and they fell asleep still linked intimately, their arms and legs tangled together.

Chapter 13

Snow fell all through the night. Michael rose early in the morning to activate the firm inclement weather notice, shutting the office for the day. They lounged around her apartment, alternating between eating, watching movies and making love. They spent a lot of time in front of the fire talking. Michael made references to his attendance at a New Year's Eve costume party, but Jordis deflected his comments. When he slid the topic into the conversation again, she hid her eyes as she lied about staying home that night. He looked at her strangely, but he eventually let it go.

In the afternoon, Michael made a store run to get sparkling wine, strawberries, s'more fixings and ingredients for a fabulous pasta dish he made her for dinner. For the first time in a long long time, neither one of them thought about the office or work for a full day. They fell asleep on the couch in each other's arms, both nutritionally, emotionally, and sexually satiated. Sometime in the night, Michael carried her to bed, climbing in behind her.

Jordis awoke the next morning warmer than usual. It took a few moments for her brain to register the male body beneath her and his arms wrapped around her. She took a deep breath enjoying the scent of him mixed with the magic of last night. She ran her hand lightly against his chest. She'd originally thought it bare but last night in the firelight and now in the light filtering through her blinds she saw the dusting of fine straight hairs. Their brown color so closely matched his skin color that they were almost invisible.

She kissed his chest. He stirred but didn't wake. Her eyes traveled down his body. The covers were bunched just beneath his waist with a long bulge in the center of their folds. She smiled and slid a hand down to unwrap her early morning present then she stretched out on top of him. She reached a hand under the pillow he'd used last night to stash condoms, hoping to find at least one more.

He released a deep breath and turned his head to look at her. A raspy voice asked, "May I help you, Ms. Morgan." She responded by sticking her tongue in his mouth and rubbing her pelvis against his engorged shaft. When she released his mouth, he said, "Oh, yeah. I can take care of that."

She laughed as she sheathed him then she climbed on board. She rode him until they were both spent. She'd just collapsed against his chest when the sound of her front door opening drew their attention.

"Was that the front door?" he asked.

Her look of horror alarmed him and he made to move, but she stopped him. She shook her head at him.

"Jo? You here?" a deep voice called from the living room.

"Who's that?"

She dropped her head against his chest. "Oh, crap. It's my brother!" She looked up. "Quick, into the bathroom."

"You're kidding, right?" He linked his hands casually behind his head, looking as if he were settling in for the long haul.

"No! Michael, get up." The sound of footsteps headed down the hall made her curse. Michael

watched her with an amused look on his face. She pulled the covers up around her and sat up.

“Brandt, give me a minute,” she yelled. “I’m not dressed. I’ll be right out.”

The footsteps stopped immediately. “Okay. I brought you something. So make it quick.”

She jumped up and shut the door as the footsteps retreated in the other direction.

Jordis collapse against the door. She made an evil face at Michael. “Really?”

“Didn’t you tell me your brother lives a little over an hour away?” She nodded her head.

“Then he’s not here for a quick visit. He’s planning to stay a while. You really don’t expect me to hide out in the bathroom all day do you?”

“Of course not. I just needed a moment to regroup.”

“Well, you got it. Chop. Chop. He brought you something, remember?”

She stuck her tongue out at him and he laughed. She stopped on her way to the bathroom and said, “How would you feel if you showed up at Raina’s apartment and caught her *in flagrante* with some guy you’d never met before.” The disturbed look on his face said it all. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Well, Mr. Remington, this morning, *you’re* that guy.” She took warped pleasure in his change of expression and headed into the bathroom.

Jordis took the quickest shower of her life, threw on sweats and rushed out to greet her brother. He chastised her. Apparently, he’d been trying to call her since Thursday night when the snow started, but she hadn’t responded to any of his calls. She realized she had no clue where her mobile phone was or whether it still had any battery life.

“Where’s your car?” her brother asked, pulling warm *Lamar’s* donuts from the oven. “I didn’t see it outside. Did you drive that thing in the blizzard that hit Thursday night?” He grabbed two plates, setting one in front of her on the kitchen island where she sat with her back

to the kitchen doorway.

“No. Of course not.”

“What do you mean ‘of course not’? You finally get another ride?”

“Not exactly,” she hedged.

“‘Not exactly’? What does that mean?”

Michael Remington strode into the kitchen. “It means that I brought her home Thursday night.” He was fully dressed, hair damp from a recent shower.

Brandt’s eyes went wide. He stared at his sister, who had closed her eyes at the sound of Michael’s voice. Brandt leaned back against the counter. “I see.” He caught his sister’s eyes when she finally reopened them. “I guess that explains why you haven’t been answering your phone.”

Jordis blushed.

Michael stepped over to Brandt and introduced himself. “Michael, it’s good to finally meet you in person. I think.” Brandt got another plate down and set it in front of the empty chair next to Jordis. “Would you like milk or coffee with your *Lamar’s*?”

* * *

Michael enjoyed watching the interplay between the siblings. Jordis was clearly chagrined at the timing of her brother’s arrival and Brandt was clearly flabbergasted to catch his sister entertaining a man. He planned to stick around awhile to see how the dynamics played out.

After breakfast the three chatted a bit then talked about the computer forensics work Brandt was doing on their case. Eventually, Jordis decided she’d gone long enough without checking her email and went to the back room to get on the computer. She’d been gone about five minutes

when Brandt asked, “So, Michael, how did you go from arrogant, domineering jerk to sleeping with my sister?”

The two men silently took each other’s measure.

Finally, Michael replied, “I didn’t.”

Brandt raised an eyebrow.

Michael grinned. “She still thinks I’m an arrogant, domineering jerk. She’s just stopped fighting the fact that she finds that irresistible.”

Brandt laughed. From that moment on, the men were at ease with each other.

Jordis rejoined them later and the three ate leftover pasta for lunch. Late that afternoon, Michael headed out to take care of some business of his own and leave the siblings time to visit. On his way out, he asked for Jordis’s car keys, promising to have her car delivered by Monday morning when she needed to leave for work.

The minute Jordis shut the door behind him, Brandt asked her, “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“No,” she said turning around.

Her honesty surprised Brandt. “Jo, this goes against everything you’ve ever said about the inadvisability of an office romance.”

“Don’t you think I know that, Brandt?”

“Then what’s going on?”

“I don’t know. I just needed....”

“You just needed what?” Brandt watched her face closely. Her look of embarrassment gave him his third surprise of the day. “Don’t you dare try to tell me you just needed to get laid. That’s

not you and I know it. There's more to it than that."

"Maybe there is. Don't worry about it."

"Come on, Jo. Talk to me."

She pushed off the door and took a seat in the living room across from him. "Really, Brandt, it was just an impulse kind of thing. It's not as if this is a long-term deal."

"Does he know that?"

She stayed silent.

Brandt rose from his chair. "I need to get some shut-eye. I didn't sleep well the last two nights waiting for someone to call me back."

"Sorry, bro."

"It's okay. I'm just glad you're alright." He kissed the top of her head as he passed by. Before he entered the hallway, he said, "I did tell you that you needed to get a man. Maybe I should have been more specific."

She grabbed a pillow from the couch and threw it at him.

* * *

Jordis spent the rest of the weekend alternating between work and hanging out with her brother. When Brandt left late Sunday night, Jordis noted that her car still had not been returned. Michael said he would make sure she had it back by Monday morning so she decided not to worry about it. Her relationship with Michael, however, she did worry about. She'd done something stupid. She'd fallen in love with him. She'd fallen in love with a man she couldn't have. For a smart woman, she really wasn't behaving too bright.

She'd told Brandt this wasn't a long-term deal. It wasn't because it couldn't be. She couldn't

have Michael and maintain her current position at the firm. At this point in her career, another lateral move would reflect negatively on her. It would appear she didn't have what it takes to make it at a firm regardless of the extenuating circumstances that had nothing to do with her legal skills. The more she thought about it, the more she knew she would never be able to repeat this weekend with him.

She awoke the next morning in a bad mood. She'd be working with Michael again today to finalize their draft response to the motion for summary judgment. Working next to him today knowing she'd never be able to feel his arms around her again would be the hardest thing she'd ever done.

When she stepped outside, she went numb. Her car had not been returned. In its place, sat a brand new Dodge Charger II Daytona Limited Edition in electric blue. *What had he done!* She whipped her mobile from out of her purse and dialed Michael's personal number. When the call went to voicemail, she couldn't contain herself. "Remington! Where the hell is my car! Please tell me you didn't trade in my Bee. Call me back ASAP!"

She didn't need this this morning. She had enough on her plate as it was. She glanced over at the Charger II appreciating its fine lines and she did love the color, but how dare he take it upon himself to replace her car. She tried the door. It was unlocked. She found a note in the glove box telling her where to find the keys. After retrieving the keys, Jordis fired up the engine and drove to the office.

She headed straight for Michael's office. On the way, she noted that everyone seemed to be atwitter about something. She passed a few cubicles with occupants who stared at her. Half way to Michael's office she ran into Vivian. "Vivian, what's going on?"

“You haven’t heard? Apparently, Michael Remington has been searching for this woman he met on New Year’s Eve. Until now, he hasn’t been able to find her. Well, turns out, she walked into the firm today looking for him.”

Jordis’s face went pale. “What?” she croaked.

“Yeah, isn’t that so romantic? I think his secretary is making reservations for them to go lunch or dinner or something.”

Jordis felt sick. She’d told him that she wasn’t his Juliet, but it never occurred to her that he’d keep searching until he found one. How could he believe that other woman was her? Even without her admission, if he really had strong feelings for her like those his father had experienced upon meeting his mother, he should have known despite her prevarication.

Her feet moved of their own accord towards his office. The anger at his heavy-handed tactics with her car simmered beneath a feeling of betrayal over his obsession with his fabled Juliet. Considering that she was Juliet, her feelings were irrational, but she failed to focus on that. She entered his office in a fog and saw a tall tanned model-type with her arms around him. Upon seeing Jordis, Michael grabbed the model’s arms and pulled away.

“Jordis,” was all he said.

“I need to talk to you a moment. Alone.”

Michael sent the model outside to wait in the reception area.

Once they were alone, she said in a deceptively quiet voice, “Where’s my car?”

His face showed surprise. Clearly, he’d expected her to go straight to a discussion of the bimbo that had been hanging on his neck.

“Your car is safe.”

“I want it back now. Immediately.”

“No, Jordis. I want you to drive the Daytona for a week and see how you like it. It’s the latest model and it has all-wheel drive.”

“Did you just tell me no I can’t have my own car back?” Her voice grew louder. “How dare you! Just who the hell do you think you are?” She was nearly screaming now.

“Jordis, calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down. You had no right.” She was nearly shaking with anger.

“I had every right.” Now, he was yelling. “What’s the big deal? I bought you a car. I need you to be safe. I would have preferred to buy you an SUV so you’d have higher clearance, but I know how much you love the Charger so I thought the Daytona would be a nice compromise.”

“Compromise? Compromise? It takes two people to compromise, Michael. You did this without consulting me.”

Michael blew out a breath and ran his left hand through his hair.

She stepped up to him, dropping her voice, “What? You think because we had sex once, you own me now?”

“We did more than have sex,” he growled. “And we certainly did it more than once.”

“Well, we won’t be doing it again,” she yelled. “So, you can stop right now treating me like I’m so kept woman. Take your damn car back and give me my Bee!”

“What do you mean we won’t be doing it again?” He reached for her, but she avoided his grasp. “Jordis, don’t be unreasonable. I know you felt something special this weekend. We both did. Why would you want to throw that away?”

“There’s nothing special about it. That’s why you have your Juliet outside waiting to take my

place.” She shoved her hands against his chest.

He grabbed her arms and held on. “Nobody’s taking your place, Jordis. Let me explain.” He was getting frustrated.

“You’re my supervising attorney, Michael. There’s nothing to explain. We knew that going in and we knew we couldn’t continue to carry on. This weekend was a one-time deal.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” He pulled her close. “Let me appoint Eric to take over the Metra Pharmaceuticals case. You can move to the Business and Finance group and then we won’t have the problem of me being responsible for supervising and evaluating your work.”

“You want me to give up my position?”

“Yes. It solves our ethical problem and then we can continue to see each other.”

“And since this move to Business and Finance would come in the middle of the fiscal year, I’d have to wait until next year to be considered for partner?”

“Yes, but it’s just a year. You know you’re going to make partner.”

“I do? Why because everybody knows I’m banging the boss?”

He released her. “Stop it, Jordis. You don’t have to be crude. And nobody knows. Well,” he looked at his office door which had been open, “nobody did know.” His secretary Lana stood there with a chastising look on her face and pulled the door close. “How about you say it louder next time so that the other twenty-four floors can hear you, too?”

Jordis dropped her face to her hands. “I’m such an idiot,” she said into her palms. “I can’t believe I did this to myself.” She looked up. “I lose another year towards partnership. I change to a division of the firm that’s not my first choice. I suffer the stigma of gossip about why I had to move to a new division. I give up the right to pick what kind of car I drive. And I do all this so

we can sleep together until you get tired of me. Do I have that right?” Her voice had returned to a normal pitch.

Michael said nothing.

“Tell me, Michael, what sacrifices are you planning to make?” She crossed her arms, waiting. “Really. I’m curious. Do you have to give up anything to have this relationship with me?”

“I’m losing a great second chair. I’d much rather have you in IP Litigation than in Business and Fin—“

She put a hand up to stop him. “Yeah, poor you.” She turned and walked towards the door. Right before she opened it, she said, “I’m flattered to know you thought my performance this weekend was worth a car.” Michael flinched. “Most men just send flowers. You might want to try that next time. Leave the keys to the Bee with my secretary. Once I get them back, I’ll return the Daytona to you. I’ll be gone for the rest of the day.” She opened the door.

“Jordis, wait.”

Upon seeing the waiting Juliet imposter, Jordis turned back to Michael and said quietly, “Oh, and enjoy your lunch.”

Chapter 14

Michael fingered the silver chain in his pocket as he stared out the window. “Talk to me, dad.”

All the nights they’d sat together talking about life and the future and love. He needed his father’s wisdom right now. He hadn’t seen Jordis since yesterday morning. The look on her face when she’d walked away still haunted him.

He was lost. He’d never felt so lost in his life. He’d been happy until Jordis had crashed into his life. Okay, maybe not happy, but he’d been content.

He ran his fingers through his hair. He thought about his parents’ fairy tale beginning. At the age of ten, he’d once said to his father at the end of their love story retelling, “It was a miracle you found her, huh, dad?”

His father had responded, “No, son. The miracle wasn’t that I found her. The miracle was that I recognized her and accepted it.”

Michael went numb. Good, lord. That was it. He’d known that night on the balcony that she was his true Juliet. He’d found her and he recognized her not once but twice. When she’d shown up at his firm, his body knew who she was and his heart had recognized her even if his conscious mind hadn’t yet understood. The problem was he hadn’t *accepted* it. He’d been fighting it. He was still fighting it. Trying to have her without losing his heart when the whole time she’d already had it. What an idiot he’d been.

Michael froze. The bracelet. He pulled the sterling silver chain from his pocket. He looked closely for the first time at the five charms linked to the chain and smiled. Glancing up at the heavens, he gave a silent prayer of thanks. He'd had a way this whole time to identify his mystery woman, a way as unique and individual as the glass slipper in the classic fairy tale. He laughed. He'd joked that he'd not find his perfect mate at a masked ball. He'd scoffed at love at first sight. And here he'd fallen victim to both.

Maybe you're not really a dinosaur, but my Prince Charming. That's what she'd said to him as they lounged in front of her fireplace last weekend.

Yeah, he was and he needed to go claim his fairy princess.

Michael turned and strode from his office at a furious pace. He headed straight for Jordis's office. It was empty. She'd left her desk clear of files and the room tidily organized. It looked as if no one even worked in it.

Michael headed to her secretary's desk. Her secretary wasn't there.

He headed to his own office, stopping at his assistant Lana's desk. "Lana, have you seen Jordis today?"

"No, but she dropped these files off last night and left a note for me to make sure you looked at the motions she left on top."

He picked up the documents and flipped through them quickly. She'd completed their response to the plaintiff's motion for summary judgment, drafted their own cross-motion for summary judgment and prepared a draft motion for sanctions. When had she had time to do all that?

He sat the motions down on Lana's desk and ran his fingers through his hair with a deep

sigh.

“Something wrong, boss?”

Michael looked at Lana. She rarely ever called him “boss.” Hearing it now made him think of the one woman who called him that out of facetiousness. Where the hell was she? “I need to find Jordis Morgan. Would you mind checking around for me?”

“Have you asked Vivian? Her and Jordis are pretty close.”

“Good idea.” He headed for Vivian’s office and burst in without knocking. “Vivian do you know where Jordis is?”

Vivian looked up from her file, surprised to see him. “No. She—”

“Never mind. That’s all I needed to know.” As he was about to leave, he turned and looked more closely at the file Vivian had sitting in front of her—the Gardner case file. Jordis was pretty passionate about getting the young mother what she needed to provide for her son. Seeing Vivian with the file made him uneasy. “Did Jordis turn the Gardner matter over to you?”

“Yes. She wanted to make sure Cynthia had someone who would fight hard to get her what she needed.”

“Why isn’t Jordis the one fighting to make sure Ms. Gardner gets what she needs?” The unease grew. It suddenly dawned on him why Jordis’s office had looked so abandoned. It hadn’t just been neat. He turned abruptly, not waiting for Vivian’s response, and headed back to Jordis’s office. When he walked in, the evidence jumped out at him. Her desk wasn’t just cleared, her personal items were gone and her walls were bare. Her diplomas, awards and pictures had been removed. His heart sank. She wasn’t just out of the office. She’d left permanently.

Her grabbed his cell phone off his belt. He dialed Jordis number, but got voicemail. He left a

quick voice message then immediately typed two text messages. He turned as he hit the *Send* button for the second time, nearly plowing into Vivian. Grabbing her with one hand to keep her from falling over, he said, “Vivian, are you trying to kill us both. What were you doing behind me?”

“Michael, we need to talk.”

“You know, Vivian, you’re the last person I want to talk to right now.” He was still furious with her. He’d learned that she’d been behind the woman who’d posed as Juliet yesterday. He moved past Vivian without a thought.

“I know, but we need to talk any way.” Vivian stepped in front of him and closed the office door.

He glanced at his phone. No response had come in yet to his texts. He tossed the phone onto Jordis’s abandoned desk with a huff. He turned away from Vivian, stalking to the north windows. “I’m sort of in the middle of something right now, Vivian. Maybe we could do this later?”

She stepped further into the room. “I know where she is. Or, at least, where’s she headed.”

Michael froze. He didn’t need to ask to whom she was referring. The small spark of hope that fluttered in his chest nearly choked him. Vivian had already proven that she couldn’t be trusted. Dared he put his trust in her now?

Slowly, he turned around, eyes cold and voice tingling with ice. “Today would not be a good day to toy with me, Vivian.”

He saw the shutter that ran through her. Her eyes telegraph an urge to flee, but she squared her shoulders and stood her ground. Despite himself, Michael admired her fortitude.

“Michael, I’m sorry. I don’t know how many times I’ll have to say that before you believe me. I really am sorry about Sheridan. I didn’t do it to make a fool of you. I did it for Jordis.” She plopped into a chair.

“What does Jordis have to do with you setting me up with a poser?”

“I knew Jordis was your Juliet,” Vivian said softly. “I figured it out shortly after she started working on the Metra Pharmaceuticals case with you.”

Michael sat down. “So you thought it would be funny to send me on a wild goose chase?”

She looked into his eyes. “It was tearing her apart, Michael. She was attracted to you, but she didn’t want to be. She stressed about what would happen to her reputation if she gave into her feelings for you. She wondered whether you were genuinely attracted to her or if this was just some sexual challenge for you that would put her back in the same situation she’d gone through at her prior firm. Only this time, she’d actually be guilty of carrying on with the senior partner at issue.”

He sat down, a little of his anger dissipated by the knowledge of Jordis’s emotional turmoil.

“How did you know?”

Vivian explained how she’d put two and two together.

“According to Jordis, she never attended that party,” Michael said.

“What did you expect her to say, Michael? She’s trying to avoid an affair with her boss only to find out that said boss is looking for this mysterious woman he made out with on New Year’s Eve so he can hook up.”

His face tightened. Her rendition of the story made the whole thing sound tawdry.

“After that steamy kiss between you two on the elevator, she was never the same.”

“Jordis told you about that?”

“No. Allison did. While Allison chatted with the guard at the front desk late that night, apparently the security camera flashed to the view in the elevator. She claimed she saw you two making out.”

So much for confiscating the security video, he thought. “She drives a silver BMW SUV.”

He phrased the sentence as a statement, but Vivian answered anyway. “Yes. I later got Jordis to admit it, but she was embarrassed that she’d been spotted.” Vivian signed. “Look, Michael, I hired Sheridan because I thought if you found someone else to focus your attention on, Jordis could relax and stop worrying about being that associate who banged her boss.”

Michael frowned at her language. “I wish you would quit talking about it that way. You make it sound cheap.”

Vivian just stared at him. Her pointed glare sending him a not so subtle message. His voice quieted. “Is that the way she felt?”

“Pretty much. Yeah.” She shifted in her chair. “Unfortunately, my overture was misguided. I realized that almost immediately.”

“What clued you in?”

“The look on Jordis’s face when she found out about Sheridan. I knew immediately that watching you with another woman was going to tear her apart. I figured out too late that I hadn’t looked beyond her words where you were concerned.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She acted as if this was just some sort of lusty attraction made worst by close proximity and the possible forbidden nature of it all.”

“And it wasn’t?”

She looked at him with an expression that suggested she thought he was an idiot. “Are men really that clueless?” She shook her head when he said nothing. “She’s in love with you.”

“She told you that?” His voice was hopeful.

“Nope. She’s just as dumb in that regard as you are.”

“Excuse me?”

“Given your behavior over the last few days, I’ve deduced that you’re in love with her too.”

He didn’t say anything. Hell, he’d just figured it out a few minutes ago. Somehow, it didn’t seem right that Vivian be the first person he told.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

He reached over and picked up his cell phone. He still hadn’t received a response from Jordis or Brandt.

“I don’t know who you’ve been texting, but I doubt they can help you. Jordis didn’t just leave the firm, Michael. She’s leaving the city.”

He stood rapidly. “What!”

“I don’t know if it’s permanent or simply time away to clear her head. But, I saw her get into an Executive Limousine about forty-five minutes ago.”

Executive Limousine gave service to the Kansas City International Airport. Michael left the office at a dead run. He almost tore the office door off its hinges in his haste to open it. He glanced at his watch as he rounded the corner where Lana sat. “Lana, I need you to keep trying to get a hold of Brandt Morgan for me. When you get him on the line transfer him to my cell phone. Also, get a hold of Doug Corbin, CEO of Metra Pharmaceuticals. We have a meeting

tomorrow, but I need to send Covington in my place.”

Lana frowned at him. “You know Corbin is not going to be happy with that. He pitched a fit last time you tried to send someone else to meet with him.”

“He’ll have to get over it. I’m on my way to the airport and I can’t be in two places at once.”

Lana looked up at him in surprise. “The airport! I haven’t made any plane reservations for you.”

“No, you haven’t and neither have I.” Her confused look would have been humorous if the situation weren’t so dire. “I’m not planning to go anywhere. At least, I don’t think I am.”

He looked at his watch again. Counting Jordis’s head start and guessing that her goal was to be at the airport at least an hour before her flight, he’d be cutting it extremely close even leaving right away.

He looked at Lana. “I gotta go.”

Finally, she smiled at him. “Let me guess. Jordis?”

“Yes.”

“You planning to stop her?”

“Yes.”

“It’s about damn time.”

Michael startled at her comment and her use of profanity. He’d never heard Lana swear before. “Does everyone know how I feel about that woman?”

Lana laughed. “Yeah, everyone except apparently you. Now, get out of here before you miss her plane.”

Michael rushed into the garage and pulled up short. He swore. He hadn’t driven a car today.

He had the truck because he was supposed to haul the motorcycle over to his mechanic after work to get it checked out and prepped for the spring riding season. Cutting through rush hour traffic in that was going to be a nightmare. He paused, staring at the motorcycle in the back of his F350. Or, maybe not. It'd be a little cold without his leather jacket, but given how much time he'd already wasted, the motorcycle was about the only way for him to make it to the airport on time.

He hopped into the back of the truck and got the cycle down. He put the cycle on the road in less than five minutes. As he hit the on-ramp for the highway, the Bluetooth in his helmet buzzed. It was Lana. "Michael, I have Mr. Corbin on the line."

"Put him through, Lana."

"Michael what's this I hear about you sending another lawyer in your place to our meeting? I thought I had made myself clear the last time. I expect you at the helm of this case and I expect you to give me personal service not pawn me off on some lower level associate."

"Eric Covington is not a lower level associate. He's a senior associate and soon to be junior partner."

"I don't care if he's a senior partner. I want you and I expect to see you."

"Mr. Corbin I have a matter I have to address that may take a few days. I will be available by telephone should you need, but I'll need you to work with Covington in the meantime."

"It's you or no one, Remington. I'm sure I can get another firm to take this matter on. It's a pretty high profile case and the payout from a win will garner legal fees that can set a lawyer up for generations."

Michael took in a deep breath. The threat to take this case elsewhere should have made him

edgy. It had the last time. Suddenly, this case didn't seem all that important any more. The woman he loved was about to leave him, possibly forever, and he was dealing with a corporate brat who thought he could blackmail him into cooperation.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Remington?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow."

"No, you won't."

"Excuse me?"

"You've made it clear that you can easily find other counsel. I'm glad to hear that because if you aren't willing to work with Covington then you'll want to take care of that as soon as possible. When you've selected replacement counsel, let my secretary know where we can send your files. I'm unavailable as of now."

"Remington—"

Michael disconnected the line without letting him finish. He'd have a lot of explaining to do to his partners, but he'd worry about that some other time.

A few minutes later Lana buzzed in again. "Michael, I've got Brandt Morgan on the line."

"Go." He heard the line click over. "Brandt, where's your sister going?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"She's on the way to the airport. Where's she headed?"

"She didn't say anything to me about a trip. And if you don't know where she's going, I surmise that this isn't a business trip. So what happened?" There was silence on the line.

"Remington, what did you do to my sister?"

Michael huffed out a breath. “Nothing. There’s just a little misunderstanding that I need to clear up.”

“What kind of misunderstanding?”

“One that has your sister running away from me...again. I can’t let her get out of the city. She’s smart enough to find a way to disappear for a long time.” Or permanently, but he didn’t want to think about that.

“My sister doesn’t run. She faces her challenges and monsters even when it’s sometimes not wise.”

Michael didn’t know how he felt about that. She could face all challenges and monsters but him? What did that say about how she really felt about him? “Well, she’s leaving town in a hurry.”

“What aren’t you telling me Remington?”

Michael rode in silence for a minute, thinking about how to answer that question. “Your sister and I sort of met New Year’s Eve.”

“New Year’s Eve?” Brandt’s voice had modulated from perturbed to curious.

“Yeah. Did she happen to mention a guy she met at a party dressed like a gladiator?”

Brandt laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You’re her gladiator?”

“Yeah.”

“I bet that threw her.”

“Yeah and so did another woman showing up at my office claiming to be the Juliet I had met that night.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh. Look, Brandt, your sister told me once that there’s nothing you can’t do or find with a computer.”

“True.”

“So find me what flight she’s on.”

“Are you asking me to break into airline flight records and retrieve personal traveler information?”

Michael grinned at Brandt’s unctuous tone. “May I remind you that I am on a mobile phone.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m on an electronic phone that scrambles not only my signal but also the signal of anyone on the line with me. No one can eavesdrop on this conversation even if they wanted to. Just a little something I patented and licensed to Uncle Sam for a trial run by various alphabet agencies.”

Michael would have to ask him the specifics on that some other time. “Well, then, yes that’s exactly what I’m asking you to do.”

“Why should I help you?”

Michael continued to weave in and out of traffic at breakneck speed. He thought about how to answer Brandt and finally settled on the truth. “Because I’m in love with your sister.”

This time the silence was on Brandt’s end.

“Morgan, you there?”

More silence then finally, “You ever happen to tell her that, counselor?”

“No. And if I don’t get to the airport and figure out what flight she’s on, I’ll never get the chance.”

“It’s amazing how dumb some smart people can be.”

Michael was getting really tired of people taking pot shots at his intellect today.

“I’ll call you back, Remington.”

Michael was only ten minutes away from the airport. He accelerated, heart racing with the fear he’d be too late. When he saw the exit for the highway, he weaved across two lanes of traffic, narrowly missing another speeding motorist. He exited to the sound of the steady blare of a car horn.

As he pulled into the first terminal, his phone beeped. “Remington.”

It was Brandt. He gave him the airline and gate number for Jordis’s flight plus her seat number. He whipped to the curb outside the boarding entrance for the appropriate airline. Michael reached for his wallet as a baggage handler approached him to tell him he’d have to move his motorcycle. Michael shoved his helmet and a hundred dollar bill in the man’s hand and promised him another if his bike hadn’t been towed on his return. He hit the airport doors at a dead run. He pissed off people at the ticket counter when he cut in and demanded a ticket for Jordis’s flight, but the counter agent assisted him after he confessed to trying to stop the woman he loved from getting on the flight. God bless hopeless romantics.

* * *

Jordis sat in her window seat curled up with a fleece blanket she’d brought from home. She’d been melancholy for two straight days and it was times like these that she wished she was a crier. She needed a good cry to release all the tension and angst built up from losing a job, a partnership and a love in the span of five days. She needed to be as far away from said love as possible. It hurt. It hurt like hell and she hadn’t expected it to. It hadn’t hurt this bad when she broke up with Keith and she’d been with him a lot longer than Michael.

“Is this seat taken?”

Jordis’s head jerked up at the sound of the voice she’d recognize anywhere. “Michael, what are you doing here?”

He sat down. “Stopping you from running away again and ruining both our lives.”

She sat up and put her feet on the floor. “Shouldn’t you be with Juliet?”

Michael smiled, but shook his head at her. “I am with Juliet. Why she continues to lie to me about it, I don’t understand. Maybe she’ll explain it to me one day.”

“Michael, I—“

He leaned over and placed four fingers over her mouth to shush her. “I love you.” He watched her eyes widened. “I love you very much, but I’ve fallen down on my duties as Prince Charming. So, do me a favor and be quiet so I can do this right.”

His hands were still over her mouth so she couldn’t speak. She nodded her head instead.

He removed his hand and reach in his pocket. “What kind of Prince Charming would I be if I didn’t bring along a talisman to prove I have the right fairy princess?”

He reached over and attached the silver charm bracelet to her left wrist. Her mouth dropped open in surprise.

“I’ve been wondering why you always fool with your wrist when you’re distracted. I thought maybe you’d lost your watch or something. I realize now that you’ve been missing this.” He pointed to the bracelet. He fingered each charm, as he explained, “The number twenty-three for the college basketball champion; a giant redwood tree for the Stanford graduate; the Eiffel Tower for the student who spent a year in Paris; the scales of justice for the lady lawyer; and a glass slipper for the little girl inside who loved the Cinderella carriage. You dropped it during your

escape on New Year's Eve."

Jordis started to cry silent tears. He wiped them away with his thumbs. A bell dinged indicating everyone needed to put their seatbelts on for take off.

"Stay with me, Jordis. You don't have to switch divisions, but you won't be working on the Metra Pharmaceuticals case any more. Actually, neither will I."

"How's that?"

"I fired the client this morning."

"What? Why?" She looked at him with disbelief.

"Because I had to choose between losing the client or losing you and there was no contest." He reached into his other pocket. "You once asked me what I was giving up to be with you. I can now tell you. I'm prepared to sacrifice or give up whatever it takes. I just need to know one thing?"

"What's that?" she whispered, almost afraid to believe this moment was real.

"Do you love me?"

The tears started again and she nodded her head vigorously though she didn't make a sound.

Michael let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Good because a car wasn't all I went shopping for this weekend." He pulled out a ring box from *Tivol* and opened it. "As you can see by the ring I selected, I've never had any doubt as to who my true love is."

Jordis peaked in the box and started laughing.

"Jordis Morgan, will you marry me?"

She nodded her head again.

"For the record, counselor, I'll need you to answer that question out loud."

“Yes! Yes, Michael, I’ll marry you.” She grabbed him and kissed him deeply. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, *Bellezza*.”

Michael slid the chocolate diamond solitaire in a twisted white and yellow gold setting onto her ring finger. He held her hand and sat back to enjoy the flight. As the plane reached lift off, he realized he had no idea where he was going. He looked over at the woman curled against his side and knew it didn’t really matter. Wherever she was going was exactly where he needed to be.