

Could that meeting have been anymore tedious?

Chloe tapped her toe on the tiles as she rode the elevator up to her office on the fifth floor. She'd wanted to meet the corporate lawyers working the buyout of her client's small gear manufacturing firm at her offices, but they'd insisted it be at theirs. An intimidation tactic, pure and simple. Drag the female junior partner to the big-high-rise five-thousand dollar a day law firm and make her feel insignificant. Pressure her into giving in to their client's demands. Bully her if necessary. Apparently it had been necessary, since she and her client had been seated across the huge oak conference table from no less than ten lawyers.

Unfortunately for them, she'd woken up grumpy. Well, she'd been grumpy with a minimal amount of sleep and anger replacing the fear she'd had keeping her awake half the night. She'd walked in armed for bear. For every change they wanted to make in their super-corporation's favor, she'd countered with one in her client's behalf. She'd been on the other side of that table, knew the coercion tactics they'd tried. She also knew how to stonewall them.

They wanted Mr. Carson's company and the patent rights to the gears he held? Fine. They were going to have to pay. And they'd pay through the nose after today's meeting, if she had anything to say about it.

The bell rang for her floor and the doors swished open. Her firm took up the entire fifth floor. Taking a deep breath she started through the reception area and headed toward her small office in the back of the suite.

"You have someone waiting in your office," the receptionist, Kelly said as she passed her desk.

Chloe paused, cocking her head to the side. She pulled out her phone to check her calendar. "I don't have anyone scheduled for today."

"He didn't have an appointment. Said he was a friend of the family." Kelly leaned closer, a conspiratorial gleam to her dark eyes. "I'd love to have a family friend who looked like that."

Chloe tried to hide her surprise and curiosity. “Did he leave a name?”

Kelly shook her head. “Sorry. A phone call came in for Mr. Berger I had to take, so I just showed him the way back to your office.”

“That’s okay.” Puzzled, Chloe continued her walk through the halls. Whoever it was she was pretty sure it wouldn’t be her stalker. Too many people milling about the office for him to risk a scene. He’d be stupid to attack her here. So, who was in the office?

Outside her door, she paused at her assistant’s desk. Sasha was still out on maternity leave, which was why Kelly at reception was fielding her calls and appointments—and apparently visitors. Pulling out her phone, she held it in her hand, in case, just in case, she was wrong about her stalker and needed to dial 9-1-1 immediately. Finally, she opened her door and stopped dead in her tracks.

“Hello, Chloe.” Wes Strong’s deep voice rolled over her like a layer of dark velvety chocolate.

Starting at his feet she let her eyes feast on him. No stylish, highly polished wingtips for Wes. Nope, he had on heavy duty work boots and jeans that loosely held his long legs, but hugged his hips nicely. The black sweater lay loosely over those tight abs she remembered from the day after her sister’s wedding, when he’d been dressed only in pajama pants slung low on his hips. It stretched tighter over his chest and shoulders, nicely showing off his muscles without being gaudy. He’d scrunched up the sleeves to his elbows. She fought the urge to sigh. She’d always loved a man’s forearms, especially ones as firm and muscled as his. He had both hands thrust into the pockets of his jeans as he leaned against the floor-to-ceiling window wall of her office, where he’d been gazing out when she entered.

Had he been watching the street? Had he been watching for her?

Slowly, she let her gaze raise to his face. He was just as she remembered, his thick dark hair cut slightly longer than military length. His face solid in a mature-man way, but no extra weight of a man over-indulging in alcohol or fatty foods. There was no smile in greeting. His jaw was set, his lips pressed

into a thin line. The slight dent in his nose spoke of it being broken once and why hadn't she asked him about it? But his eyes spoke volumes. She'd always heard that the blue flame was the hottest. Right now heat blazed in his blue eyes, her body going flush from her toes straight up to her face.

*Get yourself together, Chloe. You're not some high school geek suddenly being courted by the school's hunk or bad boy. You're a lawyer with a prestigious law firm. You chew people up and spit them out just for fun.*

With a deep breath, she closed the door behind her and stalked across the room to her desk and dropped her brief case in the center. Carefully, she shrugged out of her woolen winter coat and hung it on the coat rack in the corner of the room right next to the thick navy blue parka he'd taken the liberty of hanging there.

"What are you doing here, deputy?" she asked in her iciest voice.

"We have some unfinished business," he said without moving from his spot by the window.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Pulling out her chair, she sat and laid her phone on her desk, trying to act calmer than she felt inside.

Please God, don't let him bring up the night they slept together. She had no doubt it was fantastic, couldn't imagine him being anything but mind-blowing between the sheets. That was the problem. She'd been so drunk she couldn't remember anything from leaving the wedding reception with him until she woke in his bed the next morning.

Finally, taking his hands out of his front pockets, he pushed away from her window and strode across the room, power and grace in the way he moved. "Still have that feeling you're being followed?"

And there it was. The problem that had plagued her for weeks before she'd driven into Westen the week before Christmas for her sister's wedding. She'd let her guard down and half-confessed the issue to

Wes over coffee in the café. She'd also managed to talk herself into believing it was just her imagination. Apparently, she hadn't been as convincing to the deputy.

"I'm not sure what business it is of yours. Or why you think you needed to come down to Cincinnati to check on me about it." She paused and fixed him with her best lawyer-in-charge expression. "And aren't you supposed to be filling in at the little town sheriff's office while my sister and brother-in-law are on their honeymoon?"

"They got back last night and were in the office today." Placing both hands flat on her desk, he leaned in closer. "And you didn't answer my question. Are you still being stalked?"

Before she could put him in his place with a pithy come-back, her phone buzzed on her desk. She glanced over and didn't recognize the number.

"You going to answer that?" Wes asked with one brow quirked in a taunting fashion.

As much as she wanted to tell him to go to hell, she'd always been a sucker for a challenge. If she didn't answer it, he'd think she was a chicken. And dammit, from the time she'd been a little girl she'd been determined not to let anyone see her frightened or weak.

She picked it up and hit the answer button. "Hello?"

Wes grasped her hand, lowered the phone and hit the speaker phone button.

Chloe cast him a narrow-eyed-I'm-going-to-yell-at-you-later look, but held her temper.

No answer came over the phone.

"Hello?" she said again, the pit of her stomach churning. "Who is this?"

Heavy breathing came through the line. She went to hit the hangup button, but Wes stilled her hand as he took his phone out of his pocket. He motioned for her to keep talking then began to push a few buttons on his own phone. Curious at what he was doing, she took a breath and decided to play along.

“Is there something you want to say to me? Or do you just get off on breathing into phones?” she said, not hiding the contempt in her voice. Better contempt than fear.

*“Did you have a good meeting?”* a mechanical voice came over the phone. Its deep, distorted sound sent shivers through Chloe, her eyes lifting to meet Wes’s gaze across her desk. He made a circular motion with his finger like a television director wanting her to keep the scene rolling.

“Were you at the meeting?” She paused, waiting for a reply, hoping to keep him on the line for whatever reason Wes seemed to think he needed her to do.

Nothing but heavy breathing again.

Anger shot through her. She didn’t have time for this guy’s stupid games. And she wasn’t about to let him think he had her running scared.

“Is that what this is about? Trying to get me to drop the pay-out my client deserves?” she bit out, letting him and the man across her desk know she was pissed.

The voice on the other end chuckled, sounding like some evil-mechanical clown.

Then the line went dead.

Once more her gaze flew to Wes’s face. He was studying something on his phone.

She waited.

Counted to ten.

Counted again.

“Exactly what are you doing?” she finally asked through nearly clenched teeth. Great, her TMJ was going to act up tonight after all this teeth grinding during the day.

“Trying to triangulate where that call came from.”

*Huh? What was he? A wanna-be super-spy? “Triangulate? Like with satellites?”*

“Yes. Only got two cell tower pings before he disconnected though.” Wes shook his head slightly and pocketed his phone once more, lowering his big frame into the straight back chair across the desk from her. He fixed her with an intense stare. “Want to tell me again that you don’t think you have to worry about this guy?”

“Okay. I probably should be...am worried, but like I said earlier, it’s really none of your business.” She hated admitting that he was right and she should be worried. She also wasn’t ready to give up her anger, both at the stranger stalking her and Wes for acting like some over-protective male taking care of the little lady, when it clearly wasn’t his problem.

“Actually it is.”

She drew her brows down and tilted her head to the side, puzzled. “How is any of this your business?”

He leaned back in the chair, pulling up one jean-clad leg to rest the boot on the knee of his other leg. “Simple. You’re the sister of two people I consider friends. Both of whom have enough on their plate without trying to solve this problem. Therefore I’m going to help you.”

She stared at him, her mouth slightly agog at his audacity. How dare he just force himself into her business? Who the hell did he think he was?

Before she could tell him exactly what she thought of him, his arrogant attitude and misplaced offer of help, a knock sounded on her door.

“Come in,” she snapped.

The door opened and in stepped one of the firm’s other junior associates, Justin Matthers. “Sorry to interrupt. I didn’t know you with a client, Chloe.”

“You weren’t interrupting anything, Justin,” she said, tamping down her anger at the man seated across the desk who’d quirked one brow at her in some sort of bizarre sign of amusement. “What do you need?”

He stepped further into the room, carrying a thick file. “It’s the Richardson merger. I have some questions about the figures in the contract.”

*Crap.* That contract was due in her boss, Dale’s office tomorrow for the final negotiations on the merger. The last thing she needed was the misogynist implying the reason the contract wasn’t finished or incorrect in any way was because she, a lowly little woman, was in charge of it.

She switched her attention back to Wes, who stood, already reading the situation correctly and was already rising from his seat.

“We’ll get back to this once you’re finished,” he said, nodding to Justin, who moved out of the path so Wes could move through the door frame, pulling it closed behind him.

It wasn’t until the door clicked shut that she realized he’d left his coat hanging on her coatrack. She should’ve known he had no intention of leaving until they hashed out the problem of her stalker.

And for some reason, she wasn’t angry about it. In fact, for the first time in two weeks her body released some of the tightly held tension.