

CHAPTER ONE



Rumbling voices greeted Mayson Corelli as she entered the firm's library. Carefully averting her eyes, she drifted towards the back corner. That she ignored the others was hardly suspicious. They existed only as instruments necessary to her law practice. And she certainly never mingled in the groups milling around her now.

From her safe corner she watched them spill into the library; partners, associates, secretaries; everyone summoned to the emergency meeting. Yet who didn't already know? Isn't that what they were all whispering about? Lieber Allen, if not Wall Street's largest law firm, was without question its most prestigious. She'd been here two years and never once doubted that she'd also retire here, perhaps as Managing Partner like Greg Lamp, if she was lucky. There was no question about the will that had gotten her here, when to even dream such a thing had seemed foolish. Yet she'd defied the odds and at age twenty-seven had no intention of leaving, under any circumstances . . . even those she'd stumbled upon last night.

She felt so little emotion anymore. It hadn't always been that way, but now she wore masks in place of emotions, which was tolerable so long as she knew which one to wear. She didn't now. What was called for — shock, indignation, sadness? Shouldn't they all run through her? And yet not one of these scratched at her hardened heart. Just fear, like a chilling wind rattling in the darkness. And the cold voice that whispered: The one who threatened you is dead. Avoid the cloud of suspicion that may blow your way. Don't get trapped. Her eyes lifted as the crowd's rumble died. Greg Lamp entered the library, striding stiffly to the front podium, a distinct air about him.

"As you've no doubt heard," Lamp marched gravely into the silence. "Morris Mendelsohn was found in his Manhattan apartment last evening, the victim of an apparent homicide. NYPD

detectives are pursuing leads and seem confident a suspect will be charged soon . . .”

How soon? Mayson’s stomach knotted. How confident? And what leads? Was this a ruse or did the NYPD really have a suspect?

“These detectives are with us this morning,” Lamp revealed. “They’ll spend the day at the firm learning what they can about Morris’s practice and talking with those of us who worked with him. Please give them your full cooperation.”

As Lamp fielded the questions that came forward, Mayson wondered why they would start here at the firm. Is this where they expected to find their suspect? They’d most likely question her first. How would she hold up? Was she already a suspect? Did they know about her connection to The Lips? Her eyes collided suddenly with Tyler Waddill’s.

“That’s all we know at this point,” Lamp said, concluding his briefing. “Just please give the detectives your full cooperation and hopefully Morris’s murderer will be apprehended soon.”

As he left, the crowd began drifting toward the doors.

“Excuse me. Do I know you?”

Mayson turned at the familiar irritation; Tyler Waddill, tall and handsome with his tangled, gold hair and eyes as deeply blue as the James River that spawned such snotty creatures. For Tyler life was a cocktail party, its infinite pleasures no farther away than the nearest buffet table.

“Forgive me, Mayson,” he apologized. “For a moment, I had mistaken you for a human being.”

“Why were you leering at me?” she snapped irritably.

“I wasn’t.”

“Don’t pretend not to know what I’m talking about.”

“There!” He nodded. “I definitely saw it that time.”

“What?”

“Emotion. My God, Mayson, you’re human after all.”

She became conscious of the silence, realizing they were suddenly alone in the vast, quiet world of law books, mahogany tables and crystal chandeliers. “You want emotion, Tyler? Try hatred, contempt, disgust. The very sight of you can have me drowning in emotions!” With another icy glare she brushed past him.

“Mayson, what are you afraid of?” he asked.

Freezing, she glanced at Mrs. Nordfelt nose deep in her index cards, a pair of associates researching at a nearby table. "I need your opinion on something." He led her back into the bookshelves. Grabbing an ancient case reporter, he began flipping pages. "You're afraid. Why?"

"I'm not afraid," she whispered. "And I resent being dragged back here to explain myself. And who do you think you're fooling anyway? No one believes you read anything in here."

Shutting the book, he studied her intently. He'd never seen her like this. She was usually in control, but she wasn't now.

"Quit leering at me!" she snapped and again started away.

"Mayson, we need to talk."

Did he know something about the murder? No, it was a trick. "We have nothing to say to each other. Now leave me alone. I have to get back to work."

"Where?" he asked, returning the book to the shelf. "I mean, what are we supposed to do? Morris was our slave master but he's gone."

"You idiot," she huffed. "We're not slaves on your Tidewater plantation. This is Wall Street. And just because Morris is dead doesn't mean our assignments simply drift on down the Swanee River."

His expression didn't change with her ridicule. If she was angry, it had nothing to do with him. "Mayson, you must work hard at isolating yourself from the human race. You're quite good at it."

"Go to Hell!" She stormed off.

He caught her at the elevator. "I don't know who you think you're impressing with that shit."

Angrily she stabbed for the elevator, catching the solemn faces around her. They were in mourning, she remembered, groping for the appropriate mask.

With growing irritation, he watched the panel glow with each stop. Why did the Metropolitan, Wall Street's oldest building, also have its slowest elevators? Beside him, Mayson's eyes had become pained. "What's wrong?" he asked.