

Chapter 1

Jessica let the mental exhaustion take hold for a minute, then shook it off. Eighteen months to go. If she survived that, she'd be a lawyer and hopefully move from the reception desk to the courtroom.

She settled into her chair. "I'm back," she called to her boss. Linda owned the one person firm housed in a quaint old home turned law office in downtown El Paso. Jessica ran her fingers across the antique, inlaid cherry desk. She'd started here less than a year ago, but she already loved this place.

"Hey, how was the test?" Linda strode into the room and plopped down in front of her. A perfect-fitting Armani suit and a blonde blowout softened the toughness shining through Linda's blue eyes. The creases in her face told the world she'd faced a few battles.

"Tough, but I'm pretty sure I passed," Jessica said.

Linda smiled, then cocked her head, a question appearing in her eyes. "I bet your father would be proud."

Jessica bristled, the ache returning to her shoulders and prickles of tension running across her skin. Linda hadn't brought up Jessica's dad since the first time they met.

Jessica hated how her father's conviction for destroying evidence in a drug case shaded her pending law career. He'd been El Paso's district attorney at the time. That embarrassment

held Jessica back for too many years. She'd gotten past it, mostly, especially since her father's passing.

She shrugged her shoulders in response then willfully changed the subject. "Has it been quiet here?"

"Surprisingly so. But who knows what will walk in the door next?" Linda glanced out the large window as if she expected to see someone trotting up the steps. She turned back to Jessica. "Do you have any new projects on the horizon? You know, human remains under a pecan tree or a missing heiress?"

Jessica's reputation for finding things, missing people, murderers, had ratcheted up since she started working with Linda. She shook her head. "No more wild cases for me. I need to keep my head down and finish school. I keep getting waylaid by these other projects. It's too hard to focus on law school and my work here when I'm off solving someone else's mystery."

Linda studied Jessica. "Maybe, but I think you like striking out on your own, solving someone's problem, and coming back a hero. Practicing law is so different than that. It's tedious and requires an extraordinary amount of patience while the wheels of justice turn."

Did Linda doubt her aspirations? Not every case would be exciting, but lately, she could use a little less excitement in her life.

"Perhaps," Jessica said. "But you're a lot less likely to be confronted by people pointing guns at you or burning down the house you're trapped in."

"True. At least most of the time."

Jessica wondered about her answer. "Is that why you left the police force and became an attorney?" She had heard about Linda's first career from Jaime Castro, a lieutenant on the El

Paso police force and one of her oldest friends. Based on the admiration in his voice, Linda had excelled as a police officer.

“Not really.” Linda’s gaze softened, as if remembering something from long ago. “The problem with police work is that you don’t get to choose your cases. When they don’t seem fair, it becomes hard to put your heart into the job.”

Jessica waited for an explanation. What kind of case would make someone as tough as Linda walk away? For a minute, Jessica thought she would say more. But instead, her boss changed the subject. “Why don’t we go over the upcoming cases?”

When they finished, Linda headed back to her office. Jessica had just turned to her computer when she spied someone coming toward the door. Someone she did not want to see.

Tomás Garcia loped up the steps and opened the door before Jessica could escape. If only her test had taken longer.

“Hi, Jessica. It’s good to see you.” He sat in the chair Linda had just vacated as if he owned the place.

He didn’t. And when he’d tracked her down at a party a few weeks ago, she’d told him she didn’t want to see him again. Yet here he sat. The audacity of rich men never failed to surprise her.

“Why are you here?” She threw all the surliness she could muster into her voice.

“Is that any way to treat a potential client?”

“Tomás, I made it clear that I would never work with you again. You do remember you tried to kill me the last time.” And the time before that, she’d almost died at the hands of someone he’d forgotten to tell her dealt drugs.

“I wouldn’t have killed you. I am not a murderer. I was just angry. I thought you had taken something I considered mine.”

“That something was a human being, and she didn’t want to be with you. You’ve lost your chance with me.”

He steepled his fingers and stared across the desk. “We have a long history, and we’ve worked well together in the past.” Arrogance wafted off him like a bad smell.

Jessica scanned her desk for something to throw at him or stab him with. Life was way too short to tolerate assholes like this.

He held his hands up in surrender, as if he could read her mind. “You’re right. That last time was horrible. I shouldn’t have done so many of the things I did then. I’m sorry. I promise I’m a different man now. And I need your help.”

Fire lit in her veins. She had already taken too many chances with Tomás. Jessica took a deep breath and tried to keep from spitting at him. “You need to leave. There is no way in hell you’ve changed enough in the last few years for me to consider working for you.” She wouldn’t physically attack him, but she tried her best to stare daggers into his soul.

“Please. Let me explain. I’m married to a wonderful woman now. We have a son, and he’s the most important thing in my life. Becoming a father changes a person. I’m a much better man today. Also, I lost my mother a year ago, and I’m worried about losing my father. That’s what I need to talk to you about.”

Of course, curiosity gnawed at her, but it wasn’t enough. She loathed this man.

“You do realize that waltzing in here expecting me to listen to you after I’ve already told you no means you’re still the entitled jerk you’ve always been.”

“I’m not. I swear. Please, just hear me out. I think someone is trying to kill my father.”

“So. Go to the police.”

“I have, but I can’t get anywhere with them. My dad remarried just a few months after my mom died. His new wife has completely denied me access to him.”

“Didn’t you hate your dad? How many times have you told me you wanted to build an empire even bigger than his? Maybe he just doesn’t want to see you.”

“Things are different now. After...after what happened with Doraliz, I had to change. I wasn’t a man I could be proud of, and I certainly wasn’t a son my mother could respect. But she didn’t give up on me. Instead, she helped me see what a terrible person I’d become and gave me a way to recover.”

“Whatever. I don’t care, and I want you to leave.” Jessica refused to buy his rich boy sob story. He should have ended up in jail.

He leaned forward, hands on his knees, blue eyes staring her down, probably his attempt at acting earnest. “I know how selfish and hurtful and conceited I was. I know, and I hate that version of myself. I understand why you don’t want to work with me, but my father’s life is on the line. You have a knack for solving mysteries. I’ve seen you do it. I need your help to save my father.”

“It’s not going to happen. And if you don’t leave, I’ll call the cops.” Jessica picked up her phone and hit the timer, then turned it to face him. “You’ve got sixty seconds to get out of this office.”

Exasperation crossed Tomás’s features. He sighed and started to say something. Then he shut his mouth, rose, and walked out the door. She hoped she’d never see him again.

Linda emerged the minute he left. From the look on her face, she’d heard the conversation.

“I didn’t know you had such a long, involved relationship with Mr. Garcia.” Linda sat in the probably still warm chair.

“Yeah. Unfortunately.” Jessica said nothing more, hoping Linda would drop it. She preferred to avoid the whole sordid tale.

Linda watched Jessica for a long moment but didn’t press her for more information. “You do know that you’re always welcome to work on outside cases. Soon enough you’ll have your own legal cases.”

“I look forward to that, but not with him.”

“Fine. You should head home early tonight. Go celebrate finishing midterms with that handsome husband of yours.”

“Thanks.” She did want to celebrate, although she’d stayed up so late cramming, she’d require a second wind to do anything other than crawl into bed. Or maybe a shot or two of tequila to help her forget torts. And Tomás’s visit.