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He moved to within inches of her. Even in flats she was looking at the top of his head. His right hand crept around her, as if he thought she wouldn't notice. The left remained in his pocket.

Ambition and pride had carried her here. She wanted on *Layne* badly enough to follow orders. Victory would cement her career. She might someday be the female Joe Jamail or Racehorse Haynes—the greatest lawyers in Texas history. A blown knee had ended her first dream of becoming an All-American small forward, but you didn't need knees to be a great lawyer.

Sensing his fingers snaking up her back, she changed her mind. Partnership be damned. McGee had no right to pimp her. When Pete *suggested* she see Caswell, she should have said “No.” Scratch that. She should have said, “Hell no.” But she hadn't even uttered a polite “No thanks”—let alone resigned. Quitting would've taken guts.

*Gutless wonder!*

She bit her lip and looked off toward the curtains, trying to

withstand the hand on her back.

Maybe she shouldn't be so hard on herself. Justice meant as much as ambition. Maybe more. She liked the two nurses who had cared for Pain Layne during his short stay in Adventist Hospital. They didn't deserve to take the fall or lose their jobs over the medical disaster that was obviously the doctor's fault. Caswell's client had put Layne in a permanent coma. If she had to listen to Tony's exploits for a few hours, to make sure Stern didn't double-cross the nurses, so be it.

Tony's clammy palm clamped her neck. His deformed claw of a left hand fumbled with the buttons on her blouse.

She looked around, trying to tune out the insanity. Think of the greater good. Think of England. Think of . . . anything.

The townhouse had been a good buy before the market got really hot. She'd leveraged herself into it after paying off her law school loans. The flax-colored walls should have more yellow. She remembered painting alone on Christmas Day. All alone. The Delacroix print drew her attention. Happy kids playing in a Paris fountain. She bought it because her shrink had one in the waiting room, and Kristen found it soothing.

His fingers tried to massage the tension in her neck, tension put there by those very fingers.

Her psychiatrist had said, "*Take chances. Get out of your shell. And remember NMNS.*" *Not Mary, Not Shit.* The problem with taking a chance tonight was she didn't like Caswell. She couldn't take him seriously—not his stories of world travels, nor his clumsy seduction. And when she'd asked other women about him, what she'd heard hadn't been good. *Creep* and *weirdo* were the kindest descriptions.

NMNS. Right! NMNS meant she didn't have to tolerate this. She blinked as if coming out of a hypnotic therapy session and looked down. Her blouse was open. She checked out her bare abdomen. Not bad considering she billed two thousand hours a year and helped coach a kids' basketball team. Tomorrow she would run a 15K two

minutes off her pace in college. But she had little social life, so maybe her accomplishments weren't so impressive. *Oops*. She'd slipped into a negative thought. *Wake up!*

"No."

He shushed her, like she'd violated "time out" rules.

The last button popped loose.

She twisted, trying to spin out of his grip.

Staring at the engineering complexity of her bra, Caswell held on to her neck tighter with his good arm. She was surprised at his strength. His right arm probably compensated for a shitty left.

He got two fingers entangled with the clasp.

Kristen managed to push his hand away and pulled her shirt together.

He kept his iron grip on her neck.

"Tony, please stop. Nothing is going to happen between us."

"You just came on to me to spy?" He smirked. "Trick me into giving away the firm's secrets? You would've given Stern a go, but he's married?"

Before she could conjure a reply, he ripped her dainty bra open.

She froze. Stunned.

He jerked her close, his mouth smothering hers. He tasted of coffee and booze. Mostly booze. Tony cupped her bare breast.

That did it. She wedged a palm against his chest and pushed. Hard.

"Tony, please go. Now."

He snickered, retreated, and glanced around for his jacket. "Whatever you say, babe."

Kristen clutched her shirt together and managed to draw in a breath, relieved he was leaving. *Hail Mary*. Her bra was ruined, useless now. It had been a rare expensive purchase made the day after her first victory in trial. She wondered if she could bill the client for it.

Suddenly, Caswell turned and stepped toward her, wrapping his right arm around her neck again, moving fast, too fast for her dull

senses to react, levering her over his hip, and flipping her onto the carpet.

She landed hard on her butt, stunned. *Holy Mary and Joseph*. A lawyer at a firm supposedly working with her on the same case was bent on raping her.

Before she could get up, he was straddling her, on her, unzipping his slacks.

For that instant she lay paralyzed in disbelief, unable to move. He opened his pants and pulled his half-erect penis out of his briefs, thrusting it at her.

“Come on, doll. Suck it. You know you want it.” The accent was back.

Kristen stared for a second at his dong, dangling in her face. They all looked ridiculous, but this one more so, maybe because she had such a bird’s-eye view. He must have forgotten his Viagra, or the alcohol prevented it from going to full staff. She smelled cologne, and realized he must have splashed it on his crotch, just for this occasion. Like that would help.

He scooted closer. His ass rested on her belly, his dick inches away.

Although he had managed to pin her to the floor, he missed her arms. With a rush of adrenaline, she shoved him off. He fell backward, still holding his pathetic penis.

His head had bounced off the Chippendale coffee table, knocking over and breaking a mug, splashing coffee.

She quickly got to her feet.

His face flamed red. He managed to stand, snapping his wiener back into his briefs, but not bothering to pull his pants up.

“*Bitch!*” he screamed. His right arm flailed out behind his ear threateningly.

Was he going to hit her? When she’d left New Jersey, she’d sworn nobody would strike her again. If she let it happen, all that therapy would’ve been wasted.

He hesitated a second, and she used his mistake against him.

She jammed her thumb and fingers into his sternal notch. Special forces all over the world used the technique to disable an enemy. It could have undesirable effects, so she pulled up a bit, not wanting him throwing up on her carpet.

He crumpled backward onto the table again. Snorting and struggling for air, his hands clutched his throat.

She exhaled heavily, both out of fear and relief, thinking the fight over. Surely he'd leave after she basically humiliated him. Take his lumps and go. She waited a moment, expecting him to get up and concede failure.

Instead, he grabbed the biggest hunk of broken ceramic and threw it at her. "Whore!"

Still basketball quick, she dodged. The missile grazed her ear and stung. *Asshole.*

In disbelief she watched him get up, tug his pants to his waist, and advance toward her, his teeth locked, his jaw offset, making fists. She could run, and considered it, but decided the next woman Caswell assaulted might not have a second-degree tae kwon do black belt and Krav Maga training. He needed an attitude adjustment.

She retreated a few feet, gaining space and time to kick off her shoes. She balanced herself, assumed her stance, and blasted the heel of her hand at his throat, just missing a square-on blow that could have crushed his larynx. The shriek that emanated from her had to be heard a block away.

Her next move quickly followed, and she planted a foot in his crotch a moment later. She felt a nasty crunch, and he doubled over. She had been trained to break his nose next, and he was in the perfect position. Use her knee while holding the back of his head—but she stopped herself, unsure why. Maybe she didn't want blood spraying everywhere.

He toppled over into a fetal position, wailing.

She stood over him, daring him to get up. Hoping he would.

“Want some more? Come on, short stuff. I’m not even warmed up yet. Thought you could *rape* me? Bad idea.”

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