

## EXCERPT SINCLAIR JUSTICE

Ross knew Jose had retired for the evening, and he didn't expect him to come all the way from the top floor just to answer a door twenty feet away from his boss. Still, as a precaution, given all the drug lords he'd pissed off, Ross stuck a Glock in the back of his pants before he opened the door.

He seldom got unannounced visitors, especially this late on a weekend, but when he saw his guest, he was shocked literally speechless.

That Rothschild woman stood there, her hair tangled, her makeup long gone, still dressed in the same, now wrinkled, conservative suit. She was biting her lip nervously and she held a small box wrapped in blue paper with a bow. She gave him a tentative smile that stretched her sensual mouth and hit him below the belt. That really pissed him off...

"How the hell did you get out of jail so soon?" he finally managed. "Judge Trent wasn't supposed to see you until Monday morning."

"I know how to pull a few strings, and the Texas Attorney General is a friend of my grandfather's. I've paid the fine and pleaded no contest so they let me keep my license. For now. But I told them I'd personally apologize to you for my reckless behavior." Her smile widened hopefully. "So here I am. Sorry to show up so late, but I think we're both people of action."

He swallowed a groan and still glared at her, leaving her standing on the threshold. "How the hell did you figure out where I live? I know the department wouldn't divulge that."

"You told me."

He blinked.

She elaborated, "Remember you said I almost ran over you when you were coming out of your driveway. My car was towed from just up the road and the towing company gave me the GPS location."

His ire faded a bit, but she still made him feel...funny. He didn't like it; it was a way he hadn't felt in a long time, so he still stood there, blocking her. Texas hospitality be damned. Neither one of them were of Texas birth anyway. A trace of New York came back into his tone as he snapped, "Fine, what the hell do you want?"

She tendered the box she held. "I'd have been here sooner but I had to have these shipped same day Fed Ex as I couldn't find them anywhere in Amarillo."

He took the wrapped box, and even without removing the paper, he knew instantly what it was from the heft and shape. He stepped aside, waving her in, but he'd get her the hell out as soon as possible without being any ruder than he already had been.

When she stepped inside, he realized she was shivering. The Texas spring was as unpredictable as usual, warm during the day, but now a chilly breeze was howling. "Come inside. I'll warm you a brandy."

He swept a hand before him, and when she entered the great hall, he nodded at one of the leather wing chairs by the fire and tossed the package on the adjacent table. He added a bit more kindling to the dried oak wood fire and went to the wet bar in a corner of the room to pour her brandy into an expensive Waterford snifter. He took time to put the Glock out of sight behind the counter, not wanting to scare her. She was from the northeast and had probably never even seen a pistol.

When he returned with her drink, she was leaning back against the wing chair, holding her hands to the fire, which was just now beginning to roar, her eyes closed, and for the first time he realized she was very tired. All the more puzzled at why she'd tracked him down so late, he poked the fire up a bit and held her snifter close enough to warm the brandy slightly.

He handed it to her. She accepted it gratefully, warming her hands before taking a sip. She coughed slightly, then took a deeper, more appreciative sip. "Is this Courvosier Reserve?"

He nodded, not surprised she recognized the expensive taste. Her shivering stopped when he put the pashmina coverlet over her legs. Partly so he didn't have to look at them, but she didn't need to know that.

Her voice slightly husky, probably both with tiredness and the brandy, she asked, "Aren't you going to open your present? It's more than an apology, actually. It's a peace offering."

He obliged, seeing what he'd expected: a wooden box filled with his favorite cigars. This time he didn't bother asking how she knew, because he'd been chewing on one when he arrested her. The fact that she recognized the brand, could afford an entire box shipped the same day, and had gumption enough to approach him to make peace, told him volumes about her character. She had class, she was extremely intelligent, she had her PhD, or so she'd claimed when he arrested her, but she was also courageous and didn't shirk from tough decisions. All qualities he admired in a woman, but he wanted to keep disliking her. Had to keep disliking her. She wasn't the rural Texas type, to put it mildly.

"Thanks," he said, "but it wasn't necessary."

"I promised the judge I'd apologize in person to you, so it was necessary. I'm very sorry I was so difficult. It had been a long trip, but that's no excuse."

When he only shrugged, she added more forcefully, "Besides, this is West Texas, right? Land of hospitality? Can't we smoke a symbolic peace pipe and bury the hatchet?"

At the image she evoked, he finally had to crack a smile. A small one, but a smile nonetheless. "Are you saying you smoke cigars or that you want to bury a hatchet between my shoulder blades?"

She laughed. "A little of both, maybe, but we can start with the smoke."

She had a sense of humor, too. But since he was refusing to like her, he merely opened the box, took out two cigars, fetched his clip from the bar and a crystal ash tray, and went back to her side. He started to snip the ends of the cigars, but she gently covered his hand. "Let me. I used to do this for my grandfather."

The touch of her soft hand flowed through him, more warming than the brandy, but he told himself it was the fire, which was roaring now. Still, he put the ashtray on the table between the two chairs and handed her the clipper, the lighter, and two cigars.

She went through the ritual, rolling a cigar between her fingers, and then smelling it discreetly, a distance from her nostrils. Finally she clipped the end, rose from her chair, and leaned over him to put the flavorful tube between his lips. With an adept, practiced motion, she lit the clipped end. It fired quickly. He took a deep draw, the warm smoke immediately soothing some of his nerves. He made a mental apology to Jasmine, but this woman had brought him an entire box of the cigars he pined for, and he couldn't be rude enough to ignore her peace offering, even a law breaker who put every defense he had on high alert. As a man, and even, for some reason, as a lawman. He sensed a second agenda in her she wasn't admitting to. No matter how she couched it, this extravagant gift was a bit of a ruse.

He caught a whiff of something as she leaned over him. He wasn't sure what it was; it was too pungent for perfume or moisturizer or any of those other female things. When she straightened, her wrinkled jacket coat, already open, fell off her shoulders, and before she shrugged it back on, he saw the slight sweat stains under her armpits on her silk blouse. They were dry now, but had obviously happened when she was bombing along the road in that convertible under the bright sunshine.

Every male instinct in his body went on full alert.

He was smelling a very slight whiff of sweat under her deodorant, but it wasn't disagreeable, in fact it reminded him of another female part, fresh out of the shower and in his bed. A familiar tingling began in his groin, and he was so discomfited at who'd aroused it that he took a deeper puff, blowing the smoke out forcefully until he couldn't smell her anymore. Pheromones, he told himself, and he was only susceptible because it had been months since he'd visited his local friend with benefits.

Then the woman moved away and lit her own cigar. He didn't miss her slight cough or the fact that she didn't inhale, but he let it slide. He had a good memory too, and he recalled her saying speeding was her only vice, so she was going through this ritual to smooth his ruffled feathers and was obviously not a smoker.

The question was—why?

His cigar was half gone when she finally ventured a tentative, “Is there anything else I can do to make amends?”

He bit down on the cigar and the remark he wanted to make—yeah, follow me upstairs. Instead he put the cigar in the ash tray and gently rotated the gleaming bud out so he didn't crinkle the rest of the tobacco. His physical reaction to her was neither welcome, nor acceptable, so he decided to fight it the only way he knew. Besides, she owed him an explanation after invading his private space. “Yes. Tell me the reason for the elaborate ruse.”

She stiffened slightly. “No ruse. I really am sorry.”

“No doubt, especially when you wrote the ticket for the fine.” He slicked back his sleeve to peek at his watch. “Look, it's after midnight and I have to work tomorrow—“ A card appeared in front of his nose. He was too embarrassed to put on his specs, so he held it as far away as he could, as if he needed the firelight to read the plain but elegant embossed card. Her name, followed by PhD, above National Preservation Trust Officer, and below that, the address for the National Parks Service in D. C.

Ah, so that was it. He looked from the card to her very still face. Lovely, oval shaped with a sensual mouth. Waiting, not exactly serene, but as if to say the next move was up to him. She was lovely in the firelight. She had that fair, smooth skin, clear cornflower blue eyes, perfect white teeth and the long, thick, healthy hair of the privileged. Good nutrition, good vitamins, excellent breeding. What else could one expect of a Rothschild?

The top button of her silk blouse had come undone, exposing the slight edge of a lace bra, and he couldn't help it; he fixated on it. She was shaped exactly as he liked, curvaceous instead of the model thinness so the rage in Hollywood.

She looked down. Even in the dim firelight he saw her blush as she quickly buttoned the blouse closed. Well, at least she didn't use her sex appeal like the dangerous weapon so many beautiful women wielded. In fact she'd tried to downplay her assets, no doubt because of the nature of her job. The fact that she was so sexy and appealing while trying not to be perplexed him, and, strangely, drew him more.

He rose. "I should have realized who you were. The way you were dressed, the east coast plates. You knew me before you came here, didn't you?"

"I only had to look at your name on the ticket. I knew your name but you didn't know mine. Shall we start over again?" She rose to face him and offered her hand. "Mercy Magdalena Rothschild. But please, call me Emm. As in Auntie Emm, except my nickname is because of the double Ms in my name."

Reluctantly, he shook her hand. Immediately he released it because he felt that unwelcome warmth again travel up his arm to his gut and below. Great. Just wonderful. He already had enough distractions just now, with the missing girls task force that was proving to be an inter jurisdictional challenge and police departments nationwide sending him new cases. Just today, the press was about to blow their cover. To say nothing of his entire family due to arrive momentarily for the annual gathering he'd barely had time to start planning. And now this.

When he didn't speak, staring over her head moodily, she lifted her chin and said briskly, "Look, I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot, but I came here with the best of intentions. Preserving old buildings is my calling, just as the law is obviously yours. We're both well educated professionals. Can't we agree to disagree and not make snap judgments until we have all the facts?"

"I have all the facts, including a soil report and structural analysis—"

“I read them. They weren’t conclusive. With so many advances in structural materials, it’s quite possible a reasonable renovation could not only meet those tolerances, it could exceed them. I have to see the buildings themselves. Is it possible we could make an appointment for tomorrow?”

“In a hurry to get back to civilization?” He wanted to call the words back the moment he’d said them, but it was too late.

Those cornflower eyes wilted to grayish blue as they went opaque. She pulled her jacket tighter about her shoulders and turned toward the door. “You have my cell number on the card. I’ll check into a hotel and wait for your call, but I cleared my schedule for a number of weeks, so I’ll be here until you have time to show me the buildings.” She marched toward the front door, where she turned to face him again. “I’m sorry for bothering you so late.”

Now he felt guilty. He followed in her wake, feeling both churlish and uneasy, two emotions so unusual for him, he could hardly give them names. He couldn’t quite say he was sorry, so he did the next best thing. “I can follow you back to town. It’s late and the turns can get confusing—“

“I have a good GPS, thank you.” At the door, she turned and offered her hand again.

This time when he reluctantly reached for it, her fingertips barely brushed his. She apparently didn’t want to touch him any more than he wanted to touch her. After the way he’d acted, he could scarcely blame her. He wasn’t clear on the consequences of a negative report from her, but he knew it would be one more hassle he wasn’t capable of handling right now, especially with the family bearing down on him, wanting to know why the development they’d insisted on funding couldn’t proceed.

As she reached for the huge front door lever, he said, “Look, I have a full schedule tomorrow but I usually break for lunch. There’s a nice little café called Julienne’s half a block from our buildings. I’ll meet you there at noon sharp and then give you a tour, if we can make it quick. Good enough?”

She gave a brisk nod. "I'll be there. Thanks for the brandy. I hope you enjoy the cigars."

He wanted to tell her no, he couldn't, he was trying to quit, so she might as well have handed him a box of apples. He knew he wouldn't be able to resist the temptation, at least occasionally, but then everything about her was walking temptation, and the fact that she didn't know it only accented her allure. But before he could say another word, the door had closed behind her. Firmly. Not quite a slam, but it was a heavy door.

Grinding his teeth and wondering why this strong attraction to someone totally inappropriate had to hit him at the worst time possible, he stirred down the fire and went up to bed. It was a while before his chaotic thoughts calmed sufficiently for him to get drowsy enough for sleep. The last thought on his mind was Emm. He said her name aloud, his lips stretching in a smile more wolfish than he realized.

No one had ever been named better, and he had to wonder if the nickname came from an old boyfriend. She didn't resemble Auntie Emm or even Dorothy. Her name, when he drew out the taste of it on his lips, was "mmmmm."