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Devil's Bargain

Rachel
CAINE

When the letter is opened, there's no going back.

Dear Reader,

What's in *your* beach bag this season? August is heating up, and here at Bombshell we've got four must-read stories to make your summer special.

Rising-star Rachel Caine brings you the first book in her RED LETTER DAYS miniseries, *Devil's Bargain*. An ex-cop makes a deal with an anonymous benefactor to start her own detective agency, but there's a catch—any case that arrives via red envelope must take priority. If it doesn't, bad things happen....

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Please send your comments to me c/o Silhouette Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10279.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Natashya Wilson', written in a cursive style.

Natashya Wilson

Associate Senior Editor, Silhouette Bombshell

Devil's Bargain

By.....Rachel CAME



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DEVIL'S BARGAIN

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RACHEL CAINE

was born at the ultrasecure White Sands Missile Range—site of the first atomic bomb tests—and has kept that nontraditional attitude ever since. She's been a professional musician, accountant, accident investigator, Web designer and graphic artist...all at the same time. She currently works in corporate public relations and maintains a full schedule of writing, with her successful Weather Warden series from Roc entering its fourth book and nine other novels already in print. Visit her Web site at www.rachelcaine.com.

For all my kick-ass girls.

*You know who you are.
Everything you do matters.*

Contents

About The Author

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter 1

Sol's Tavern was a place for serious drinkers.

It had no elegant decor, no pretty people sipping layered liqueurs. Sol's had a bar, some battered stools, a couple of slovenly waitresses, and a surly guy to pour drinks. There was a dartboard with Osama bin Laden's face pasted on it behind the bar, and for a dollar a throw, you could try your luck; the proceeds went into a faded red-white-and-blue jar that promised-however doubtfully-to go to charity.

But the best thing about Sol's, to Jazz Callender, was that it wasn't a cop bar, and she wasn't likely to run into anyone she'd ever known.

Jazz pulled up a bar stool and set about her business, which was to get so drunk she couldn't remember where she'd been. She caught the bartender's eye and nodded at the empty spot in front of her. Their conversation consisted of a one-word order from her, a grunt from him, and the exchange of cash. Sol's wasn't the kind of place where you ran a tab, either. Cash on the barrelhead, one drink at a time.

I could get to like this place, she thought. And knew it was a little sad.

As she leaned her elbows on the bar and picked up her Irish whiskey, Jazz scanned the bar's patrons in the mirror. She didn't actually care who was there, but old habits were hard to break, this one harder than most. The faces clicked into her memory, filed for later. A couple of unpleasant-looking truckers with bodybuilding hobbies; a fat guy with a mean face who looked as if he might be trouble after a few dozen drinks. He was drinking alone. There were two faded night-blooming women in low-cut blouses and dyed hair, years etched as if by acid at the corners of their eyes and mouths.

Jazz was still young-thirty-four was young, wasn't it?-but she still felt infinitely older than the rest of them. Seen too much, done too much...she wasn't going to attract a lot of attention, even from the bottom-feeders in here. Especially not dressed in blue jeans, a shapeless gray sweatshirt with an NYU logo, and clunky cop shoes left over from better days. Her hair needed cutting, and it kept falling in her eyes. When she looked across at herself in the mirror she saw a wreck: pale, raccoon-eyed, wheat-blond hair straggling like a mop.

Her eyes still looked green and sharp and haunted.

Sharp...that needed to change. Quickly.

She tossed back her first whiskey, clutched the edge of the bar tight against the burn, and made a silent again gesture at her glass. The bartender made a silent pay me first reply. She slid over a crumpled five, got a full shot glass of forgetfulness and slammed it back, too.

The door opened.

It was gray outside, turning into night, but even the glimmer of streetlights was blocked by the man coming in. Tall, not broad. Her first thought was, trouble, but then it turned ridiculous, because this guy wasn't trouble, he was about to be in trouble. Over six feet and a little on the thin side, all sharp angles, which would have been okay if he hadn't come dressed in some self-consciously tough leather getup that would have looked ridiculous on a Hell's Angel. He didn't have the face for it-lean and angular, yeah, but with large, gentle brown eyes that scanned the bar skittishly and looked alarmed by what they saw.

His badass-biker leathers were so new they creaked.

Jazz resisted the urge to snort a laugh and repeated her pantomime with the bartender. Behind her, she heard the squeak, squeak, squeak of the new guy's leather as he walked up, and then he was climbing onto a bar stool next to her.

"Love that new-car smell," she told the bartender as he poured her a third shot. He gave her a cynical half smile and took her five bucks. The fool did smell like a new car-also some kind of expensive aftershave that reminded her of cinnamon and butter-very nice. So maybe he did have some sense after all, biker leathers notwithstanding. Idiot. She imagined what kind of welcome he'd have gotten if he'd walked into a bar like, say, O'Shaugnessey's, over on Fourteenth, where the cops congregated. They'd have probably directed him-with velocity-to the gay leather bar down the block.

Her comment hadn't been any kind of invitation to talk, but the guy swiveled on his bar stool, held out a big, long-fingered hand, and said, "Hi."

She looked at the hand, which was well manicured, then glanced up into his face. His soulful brown eyes widened just a little at the direct contact. Now that he was closer, she could see that he looked tired, and older than she'd thought, probably close to her own age, with fine lived-in lines at the corners of his eyelids. He had a nice, mobile mouth that looked as if it wanted to smile and didn't actually dare to try under the force of her stare.

Normally, she might have thrown him a break. Not today. And not in that getup.

She turned back to her drink. The whiskey was setting up a nice nuclear fire in her guts; pretty soon, she'd start to feel relaxed, and after throwing a few

more peat logs on, she'd start feeling positively good. That was why she was here, after all. It was a private kind of ritual. One that didn't involve making new friends.

"I'm James Borden," he said. "You're Jasmine Callender, right?"

The hand was still out, holding steady. It occurred to her a half second later that he shouldn't know her name. Especially not Jasmine. Nobody called her Jasmine. She felt tension start to form in a steel-hard cable along her back and shoulders.

"Says who?" she asked the mirror. No eye contact. He was staring at the side of her face, willing her to turn around.

For a second, she thought he was going to answer the question, and then he reverted to a lame-ass pickup line. "Can I buy you a drink?"

He shoots, he misses by a mile. "Got one." She nudged her full glass with one long, blunt-nailed finger. "Blow, James Borden."

He leaned closer, into her personal space, and she smelled that aftershave again. The urge to move into that warm, inviting scent was almost irresistible.

Almost.

"Jasmine-" he began.

She turned, stared him in the eyes, and said, "If you don't want to get blood all over that nice new outfit, you'd better back your biker-boy wannabe ass off, and don't call me Jasmine, jerk."

He leaned back, fast. His expression was one of shock for a second, then it shut down completely. His eyelids dropped to half-staff, giving him a belligerent look. Good. He matched the leathers better that way.

She held his gaze and said, "If you have to call me anything, call me Jazz."

"Jazz." He nodded. "Got it. Right. Like the-okay. I was sent to deliver something to you."

And the cable along her spine ratcheted tighter, tight enough to crack bone. God. She wasn't carrying a gun, not even a pocketknife. Even her collapsible truncheon—a girl's best friend—had been left on the hall table at home. Great. Of all the nights to tempt fate...

He must have read it in her face, because he smiled. Smiled. And the smile matched the eyes, dark and gentle and completely not right for a guy pretending to be a Hell's Angel reject.

"Don't worry, it's nothing bad," he assured her. "In fact, I think you'll find it pretty good. Not a subpoena or anything."

He started to unzip a pocket on his leather jacket. The zipper was stiff. As he tugged at it, she asked, "How'd you find me?"

He didn't look up. His head stayed down, but she saw tension accumulating in his shoulders for a change. "Sorry...?"

"How'd...you...find...me." She kept her voice cold and flat. "You follow me from home? You watching my house?"

"Nothing like that," Borden said. "I was told where to find you."

She rejected that one out of hand. "I've never been here before, asshole. How could anybody tell you to come here to find me?"

He conquered the pocket's zipper and wrestled out a red envelope. "Here," he said. "I'll wait until you read it."

"Because?" She didn't take the envelope.

"Because you're going to have questions once you do."

He gestured with the envelope again. Big, red, square, like a thousand Valentine cards she'd never gotten over the years, but it was long past Valentine's Day and she was in a far-from-romantic mood.

She let him hang there for a good thirty seconds, watching his outstretched hand slowly sag with rejection, and thought, Well, what the hell, at least I can throw it back in his face if I actually take it.

She was reaching for it when Borden lowered the envelope and sat back, staring over her shoulder.

She felt alarms going off in the back of her head and risked a look. A shadow loomed behind her.

Two shadows, actually. Big ones.

The weight-lifting trucker twins had taken an interest.

"Ain't that sweet?" one of them said in a high, girly voice. He was wearing Doc Martens boots, battered blue jeans and a faded T-shirt that read Kinnison's

Feed & Supply. A three-day growth of straggly beard. Watery eyes. "Faggot's giving the lady a card." He made wet kissy noises.

His buddy was a grimy Xerox copy, except his T-shirt read Highway to Hell and was ripped at the sleeves to show off massive biceps. Tattoos, of course. You could never have too many of those. His mostly involved thorns, blood drops and naked women. The AC/DC fan ambled around Jazz and followed up his buddy's comment with a shove to Borden's shoulder. Borden rode the motion and slid off the bar stool. He wasn't a small guy, and he had good bones, but he wasn't a fighter, Jazz could see that at a glance.

"Hey!" Jazz said sharply, standing up, as well. "Back off, guys. I don't want any trouble."

"You don't," Borden said under his breath. "Right. What was I thinking?"

"Yo, leather boy, shove your cute little Valentine card up your ass, you're bothering the lady," said the one whose T-shirt advertised Kinnison's. He was the power of the two; Jazz knew that from a half-second glance. He had intelligence in those narrow light eyes, and a kind of lazy satisfaction. This was what he'd come here for, to find somebody to pound over a few drinks. She was just a convenient excuse. Lady. Yeah, right. She looked the part.

Borden's voice had gone dangerously soft, his eyes closed and dark again. "Is that right? Am I bothering you, Jazz?"

"Woman like this don't want no candy-ass butt boy," Kinnison's said over her shoulder to him. "Fine piece of ass like this, she needs some real companionship." He was deliberately staying behind her, pressed close. His idea of courtship would be asking what kind of condom she'd like, flavored or ribbed. If he was even that considerate.

"Funny," Jazz said, and downed the last glass of whiskey she'd ever drink in Sol's. "I started out a lady and now I'm just a fine piece of ass, and you haven't even bought me a drink yet."

"Shut up, bitch, nobody's talking to you," AC/DC snarled, and put one hand the size of a canned ham on Borden's chest and shoved. Borden, who must have been seduced by all that over-the-counter toughness he was wearing, shoved back.

Mistake.

"Stay out of it," Jazz said, brisk and succinct, to Borden. She needn't have bothered; Kinnison's stepped around her and landed a fat punch to Borden's jaw.

Ouch. She heard the crack of bone on bone, and Borden staggered back, off balance.

"Hey!" she snapped. "Give the bitch some attention, why don't you?"

Kinnison's, pulling back for another punch, hesitated and turned back around to face her. Grinning with unholy glee, he said, "Yeah, okay, baby, let's play."

He shot a sideways look at AC/DC, who went after Borden. No doubt in Jazz's mind that he was thinking he'd backhand her and put her in her place, then get on with the serious beat-down of his only real opponent-the man.

She smiled. "Yeah," she said softly. "Let's play."

She spun on the bar stool, clocked him with an elbow hard to his nose and felt the sharp crack of bone and cartilage. She didn't stop to let the pain register; she straightened her arm and muscled into a spin as her feet hit the floor. Kinnison's twisted away from her in a corkscrewing spiral, off balance, and as he came around roaring, she sidestepped his rush, grabbed a handful of greasy hair and slammed his forehead into the tough oak bar. Twice.

When she let go, he slithered limply down to the floor. It had taken all of about two seconds, and he was bloody and utterly unconscious.

Borden was just now gaining his balance, shaking off the punch and staring at her as if he'd never seen her before. Tactical error, because it gave AC/DC the opportunity to pound a fist straight into his gut, double him over and send him flying at the far wall, hard. AC/DC followed him, wading in with lethally steel-toed Doc Martens to the ribs.

Jazz, blood already pounding red-hot, didn't hesitate. She left Kinnison's limp body and leaped over a fallen chair, landed flat-footed as a cat in front of AC/DC. He yelled something obscene in her face; she didn't even note the words, just the reek of bad breath, bad teeth and alcohol.

Watch him. Watch...

He rushed her like a charging bear. She swept out of his way and left him to trip over the fallen chair, but he was fast, faster than she'd thought and not nearly as drunk as she'd hoped. He swerved. Before she could turn she was engulfed by his brutally strong arms, rippling with thorn tats and overendowed girls.

Borden, down on the floor, coughed out a mouthful of blood and tried to get up.

"Stay down," she said. Weird, how calm her voice could sound at times like these. She might have been asking him to pass the salt. "I'll be done in a second."

AC/DC's breath pistoned her ear, and she felt the suggestive grind of his hips against her.

"In your dreams, asshole," she said, and simply let her knees go, dragging him over. When his center of gravity was higher than hers she flowed forward, then quickly reversed, whipping his own momentum against him into a shoulder roll. He grabbed a handful of her hair on the way over, and she ended up on his back. He flailed and bucked, trying to throw her off, but she had her arm around his neck and she applied pressure, cutting off blood flow until his body went slack.

And then she kept on holding the pressure, fury mounting. Stop it, you'll kill him, something told her, but it was a small voice, and she wasn't really in the mood to listen anyway.

She kept choking him until a baseball bat slammed splinters out of the wood floor right next to her.

She looked up to see the bartender/owner-Sol himself?-his face purple with fury, pull back for a straight-for-the-bleachers swing at her head. She let go and held up her hands. He didn't lower the bat as she got to her feet.

"Cops are on the way," he said, which was the longest speech she'd heard from him yet. "Take your boyfriend and get the hell out. Don't come back."

Jazz fought off an adrenaline-hot wave of dizziness and went to where Borden sat crumpled against the wall. He was probing his bleeding mouth and looking dazed. She grabbed a leather-clad elbow and dragged him to his feet.

"Let's go," she said, and guided him toward the door. He yanked free after a couple of steps and staggered back for something.

The red envelope, lying on the floor.

He tucked it into his jacket and followed her out, stumbling over the two prone bodies.

Outside, the night was cool and quiet, stars shining in a cloudless sky. A blurry bass beat thumped from a dance club down the street, and the sidewalk was thick with teenagers trying to look sullen while they waited their turn at the red velvet rope. Jazz turned left, heading uptown. Borden caught up with her in

a couple of long-legged, stumbling steps. He was wiping blood from his face with a clean white handkerchief.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your lip..."

"It's nothing," Jazz said, and tasted blood. She dabbed at the cut on her lip and couldn't remember when she'd picked it up. "How about you? No broken bones?"

"Bruised ego. Among other things."

"You know, the tough-guy act? Really not all that convincing." She stepped out to wave down a cab, but it sped up and passed her by. Maybe the problem was the ad for Armor All lurking next to her. He really did look like he'd been whopped pretty good. She muttered a curse and took the handkerchief away from his face to inspect him with merciless authority. "You'll live. You'll have a nice shiner, though. And you should see a dentist, he popped you in the mouth pretty good. What about the ribs?"

He winced when she probed them, but they didn't feel broken. Just bruised, probably. She pulled up his shirt to see bruises forming across smooth, trembling lines of muscle. His skin felt flushed and velvet soft.

"Hey!" He smacked her hands away. "I'm all right."

"You were lucky," she said, unapologetic. "If you've got a perforated lung, fine, go aspirate blood in peace. And don't bother me anymore. Thanks for ruining my night. I was starting to like that bar."

She hailed another cab, but it passed her by. Probably a bad block. She decided to keep walking, put some more distance between herself and Sol's. Any cop with half a brain would be able to pick Borden out of a crowd from a description, wearing that stupid Harley ensemble.

Speaking of which, Borden wasn't going away. As she started walking again, he fell in behind her, her own personal black-leather shadow.

"Stop following me."

"I can't."

"Trust me, you can. Just quit putting one foot in front of the other."

He kept following. She walked faster. That wasn't an issue for him, considering the length of his legs. She rounded on him after another half a block, fists clenched, knuckles wincing at the pressure. "Are you deaf? Get lost, idiot! I know you speak English!"

His nose was still bleeding, but only a trickle. He wiped it absently and held out the envelope. "Take it."

"Oh, Jesus!" she yelled, out of patience, then grabbed it and waved him off. "Fine, whatever."

He didn't move.

"Oh, for God's sake-look, you've done your duty, I've got it, whatever the hell it is, now would you please just--"

"Open it," he said again, and this time he sounded like he meant it. "I'm not going anywhere until you do."

She eyed him for a few seconds. His gel-spiked hair really was stupid, but the leather might have looked halfway decent on somebody it suited; he'd probably bought it because he'd been spooked at the prospect of coming to the bad side of town and trolling tough streets. Leather had probably seemed like a smart choice. And hell, it had probably kept his ribs from breaking, so maybe he'd been right after all.

"Lose the jacket," she said, and turned and walked away. She heard the sound of metal zippers and jingling chains, and glanced over her shoulder to see that he'd taken off the jacket and had it draped over one shoulder. A black stretch shirt, black leather pants...yeah, that was all right. Maybe the leather pants were little more than just all right, not that she'd ever admit it.

"I mean it," she said. "Lose the jacket. Dump it, unless you want us both to get picked up for assault."

She pointed at an alley, where a homeless guy lay rolled up in newspaper.

Borden stared at her. "You're not serious."

"You want to talk to me, get rid of the thing. The cops will be all over us if you drag it around."

"Do you know how much this thing cost?"

"Don't care." She resorted to flattery. "You look better without it."

He hesitated, then walked over and handed it to the homeless guy, who clutched it in utter shock and hurried off into the shadows, probably intent on selling it, because he knew he'd never be able to hang on to it on the streets. Jazz wished him the best deal, a warm bed and the rest of the Irish whiskey she knew she wouldn't get to drink, at least tonight.

She wished Borden would move closer so that she could lose herself in that smell again, warm and cinnamon-soft. The tide of adrenaline was dropping, and it left her feeling weak and shaky.

The paper felt stiff and warm in her hand.

Borden silently trailed her as she took a right turn at the corner, up Commerce, and headed for a Starbucks half a block up. He'd look all right in a Starbucks, she wouldn't look wrong, and nobody looked for fugitives among the latte-and-mocha set.

The place was packed, full of chatting couples and groups of friends and a few dedicated, lonely laptop users looking pale and focused in the glow of their screens. She pointed Borden to a side table, near the corner, and ordered two plain coffees from the barista. He'd probably prefer a soy half-caff mocha-something, but that wasn't her problem, and she wasn't that committed to the conversation. Even the regular coffee cost an arm and a leg, and she hardly had a lot of money to burn, considering her state of unemployment didn't look likely to end soon.

Besides, since she couldn't go back to Sol's, she'd have to save her booze allowance for a more expensive bar.

Settled at the table, drinking hot strong coffee and feeling the whiskey start to retreat from the field, she turned the envelope over and over in her hands. Plain block printing on the outside read "Jasmine Callender." She didn't recognize the hand, and held it up to Borden. "You write this?"

He shook his head.

"You know what's in here?"

"Nothing that will blow up or infect you," he said. He sounded tired. Adrenaline fading. She knew the feeling. "Hey, by the way, thank you. But I could've-"

"Taken care of them? Yeah, I know." Male ego stroking. She was an expert on the subject, after years with McCarthy...no, she wasn't going to think about McCarthy. She didn't take her eyes off the envelope. If she'd still been on the

Job, she'd have bagged it and dusted it for prints, but there was no point. She no longer had access to those kinds of toys. "Who gave this to you?"

"My boss."

"Who is...?"

Borden sighed and sipped his coffee. He made a face-she'd been dead right about his preferences-and watched her without replying.

Just get it over with. She slid a fingernail under the envelope flap. Tugged experimentally. It was only lightly sealed, and came open with a crisp pop. Despite his assurances, she lifted the flap carefully.

No booby traps. There was a thick parchment sheet of paper inside, folded to fit the envelope. She extracted it, using her fingernails, and put the envelope aside. Wish I had chopsticks, she thought as she made do with a couple of coffee stirrers to hold down the edges and smooth it out.

"What are you doing?" Borden asked. He sounded annoyed but interested. The table creaked as he leaned his weight on his elbows, craning for a look.

"Not getting my fingerprints all over it," she said. "Just in case."

The letterhead was *Gabriel, Pike & Laskins, LLP*, with an address in New York City, on Central Park West. Nice, old-fashioned raised printing, none of that inkjet stuff. The cream-colored paper had thickness and texture.

It read:

Dear Ms. Callender:

Our firm has been engaged by a nonprofit foundation to offer you a business opportunity. Our research has shown that you have made inquiries with lending institutions toward opening a private investigation agency, which inquiries have been denied. The nonprofit agency wishes to make funding available to you, under the condition that you accept a partnership agreement with another qualified individual.

The terms of this agreement will be discussed in a separate communication should you indicate a desire to proceed. As a good-faith gesture, the firm has provided the name and vitae of the individual our client requires you to accept as a partner in this start-up business, as well as a check made out in both of your names in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars (U.S.), which should be used to defray expenses related to establishment of the partnership,

including but not limited to rent, office equipage, and hiring of staff, as well as an advance against salary.

Please communicate your reply via the individual who has been entrusted to deliver this communication. We thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Milo Laskins, Partner

Gabriel, Pike & Laskins, LLP

Jazz read it again. Then again.

And slowly tented the envelope to look in it again.

"It's there," Borden said. "The check, I mean."

"How do you know?"

"I put it in myself."

She reached in and pulled out...a business check. Thick, official stock, emblazoned with the Gabriel, Pike & Laskins, LLP, name and address. Private bankers. Printed with a neat, computerized "one hundred thousand and no/100."

Made out to Jasmine Callender and Lucia Garza.

"Here," Borden said, and slid over another envelope-slightly bent from the beating he'd taken, but bloodstain-free-that when opened proved to have some kind of résumé with the name Lucia Garza in bold at the top. She didn't read it.

Her eyes went back to read the check again.

One hundred thousand and no/100.

Borden was still coming up with things, like a magician without a top hat...a business card, this time, in creamcolored stock that matched the letterhead and the check. Gabriel, Pike & Laskins, LLP. Under that, in smaller letters, James D. Borden, Attorney-at-law.

Jazz couldn't help it. The whole thing was so absurd, so downright idiotic, that she started laughing, and once she had, she couldn't stop. She clutched Borden's card and laughed until her sides hurt and her eyes watered, with his frown grooving deeper every second.

"You're-" She finally managed to gasp it out. "You're a lawyer?"

He folded his arms and sat back. He looked tougher in the black knit shirt than in all that load of leather and zippers; he actually had some biceps to flex, though nothing like the trucker twins back at Sol's. She remembered the washboard-tight abs, and thought he was probably more of a boxer or a runner than a weightlifter. Some strength in him, though. Not that the trucker twins wouldn't have kicked his ass until it fell off, but...

He derailed her train of thought by saying, in an aggrieved tone, "Yes, I'm a lawyer. What's so funny about it?"

Which set her off again, gulping down giggles, wiping tears from her eyes. His vanity hadn't just been wounded, it was on life support, but she couldn't help it. The idea that a lawyer had come all the way from New York City, dressed in Harley make-believe, to deliver some ridiculous, asinine joke was...

"Was it Brown?" she finally asked, once she was sober enough to get through the question. "Welton Brown? Big guy, snappy dresser, terrible sense of humor?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm asking who put you up to it. Was it Brown? I knew he'd go to extremes for a prank, but..."

James Borden, attorney-at-law, wasn't just looking wounded now, he was starting to look pissed off. She preferred that, actually. Vulnerability was something she always found disturbing. Aggression, that was right up her alley.

"Lady, were you in the room back there when I was getting my ribs kicked in? Would I do that for a practical joke?" Borden skidded his chair back from the table and stood up, leaning over with both hands flat on the wood. "All right. Look, I've just about had it. I caught the crying-baby express flight from New York. I've been insulted, hit, kicked, lost a jacket I spent a thousand dollars on..."

She swallowed another giggle. "Seriously? A thousand? Damn. Why'd you go and listen to me, then?"

"...and all to hand you the chance of a lifetime. If you don't want it, fine. I'll just go home and tell my boss you're not interested." Borden grabbed for the check. She slapped her hand down hard on it.

"Don't get cranky, Counselor," she said, and nodded at the chair. "Sit."

He stared at her, leaning close, for long enough that she thought she might have pushed him too far, but then his elbows unlocked and he lowered himself down

to the seat again. All was not forgiven, but he was willing to give her another chance.

Which she promptly screwed up by saying, "So who's Lucia Garza? Some scumbag client of yours that you suddenly need to move out of town, set up with a new identity, and find a place to launder her drug money?"

He actually blinked. "Are you always this unpleasant with people trying to do you a favor?"

"Only when they're lawyers."

Borden stared at her for a long, long moment, then stood up again. "Thanks for the coffee," he said. "I'm going to the hospital to get my ribs taped now. If you don't want the check, fine, tear it up. If you don't cash it, we'll assume you're not interested. If you do, Miss Callender, please be advised that we consider cashing the check a binding good-faith contract, and believe me, we have the resources to enforce it. Call the number on the card and talk to Mr. Laskins before you do anything stupid, since you obviously don't think I can advise you." He pushed the chair in, neat and courteous. "And hey. Have a nice day."

He was walking away when she said, "Hey. James Borden. Get back here."

And for once, somebody didn't follow her orders.

She stared, bemused, as he walked up to the door. He actually opened it.

He was going to just...leave.

She fidgeted with his card, drummed her fingers on the down-turned check-one hundred thousand and no/100-and made a split-second decision.

"Borden," she called again. "Hey, Counselor. Come back. Please."

He was already going. He really was leaving. She couldn't believe it.

She got up and went after him, caught his arm and dragged him to a stop just outside the door. "Seriously," she said, and let go of him when she caught sight of his face. "I'm sorry, okay? Can we talk?"

"You going to insult me again?"

"Maybe," she said. When he gave her a disbelieving look, she shrugged. "What, you want me to lie to you?"

"You're unbelievable."