

**MISTRESS**  
**OF THE**  
**RUNES**

**A MYSTICAL ROMANCE**

*by*  
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## PROLOGUE

Corporate turf wars are ancient battlefields reincarnated—warfare waged on laptops, cell phones, and PDAs by warriors whose armor is Armani and who fight to the death for promises made on paper held in brokerage houses they’ll never visit, backed by government gold in vaults they’ll never see. Like all fighting, it’s essential or senseless depending on how long one has been at war.

Born to corporate combat, and adept at outthinking the enemy, I pick my crusades carefully and, once committed, never give ground. My staff is loyal. They know with certainty I may lose a battle but I will always win the war.

“I’m not hiring her, Jack,” I said. A laser beam of sunlight broke through the tall glass windows, ricocheted off the stainless steel banding of my angular glass desk, bounced off the gold entertainment trophies behind me, and pointed like a radiant celestial finger at my crystal desk clock. 11:11 a.m.

Jack fiddled with the button on his vest and slouched against one of my pale green leather chairs, looking battle weary. “She’s bright, eager, talented, and a Harvard grad.”

“She’s sleeping with our CEO. Why don’t you hire her for your sales division?”

We both knew why. CEO Anselm Radar didn’t trust Jack when it came to women.

“She’s summa cum laude, Brice.”

“In what?”

He paused, obviously trying to spin it, and finally gave up, muttering, “Microbiology.”

“Sounds perfect for network programming or talent management. In fact, she’s precisely what I lie awake nights wishing I had—a microbiologist!”

Jack looked down at the rug. “Well, I’m glad, because she’s right outside. Anselm told me to bring her over. She’s your new vice president of strategic development.”

He glanced up, perhaps to see if he was in any immediate danger of being run through with a letter opener. I glared at him in silence until he dashed out of my office and, seconds later, ushered in a tall, thin, dark-haired, young woman with alabaster skin and overly bright lips. She was wearing a tight, black V-neck shirt that hugged her body like a leotard and a matching black skirt that stopped mid-thigh to embrace her legs.

“Brice Chandler, Megan Stanford,” Jack said, and bolted out of the room.

“Ms. Chandler, I’m so glad to meet you. Anselm has said nice things about you.”

I sat down, crossed my legs, propped my chin up on my hand, and stared across the desk into her eyes. “How is it that a microbiologist gets a job in an entertainment conglomerate as vice president of strategic development?”

“Anselm just feels I have something to offer,” she said, quite composed, turning her head away as she spoke, in the bored and idle fashion of someone who doesn’t have to make an impression.

“I am an extremely frank woman, Megan. Since you have been added to my senior staff, without my permission, let me clarify how I work. You will do what is right for the company at all times. You will become a cooperative member of the senior team. You will not become Anselm’s spy in my camp. And if I learn that you are violating company policy by sleeping with the CEO, as rumored, I will fire you without hesitation. Are we clear?”

She batted her fawn eyes, giving me her full attention.

“Good. Because, Ms. Stanford,” I smiled coldly, “you will not be under me, if you are under him. Now, get out of my office and go find something to...strategically develop.”

## CHAPTER ONE

It was the fourth year—that time in my relationships when everything always exploded like fireworks at a Chinese New Year. I had lived the four years so many times I could trend them. Year One, the Year of Finding—locating the love of my life. Year Two, the Year of Fooling—pretending this was the love of my life despite obvious signs to the contrary. Year Three, the Year of Fucking—albeit diminished and periodic, banging the love of my life who I subconsciously knew was actually not. And finally, Year Four, the Year of Forgetting—obliterating from my memory everything that had taken place over the last three years so I could merrily return full circle to the Year of Finding—the love of my life. Clare and I were in the fourth year.

I knew I should leave Clare, but I couldn't handle one more breakup in which a woman screamed, cried, and carved her name in my furniture, my partners always seeming to exhibit far more emotion upon my leaving than upon my staying.

I glanced in Clare's direction as I tossed my Birkin briefcase onto the couch and headed for the bedroom to change clothes for that evening's fund-raiser. She was seated on the edge of a straight-backed wooden chair, staring intently at her sheet music propped up on the metal stand in front of her, her body bent over the beautifully polished cello, her arm sawing out melodramatic moans. I waved hello.

Clare lifted her head and smiled in my direction as if I was only a slightly annoying distraction. Her long, thin arms enveloped the body of the cello as she caressed the notes from its strings with the grace and dignity befitting a symphony performer. I paused to watch her push

her body into the backside of the instrument with a rhythmic pulsing, moving with the soft melodic sounds erupting from its burnished soul, gripping the instrument with her knees, an urgency overtaking her as her strokes became more fervent, controlling the instrument's every mood and melody, and soon she was forcing it into an intense and richer longing. It dawned on me, as the music reached its climax, that the cello was the only thing Clare had tightened her thighs around since I'd known her.



"Be back late," I said as I whisked across the room, this time dressed in a black Armani pantsuit and heels.

"Have a good time," she replied in our detached but friendly style of exchange.

"I can't have a good time at these events. Why don't you go, and I'll stay here and play the cello." But I knew she couldn't hear me over the instrument's renewed moans.

As I maneuvered through the maze of one-way streets to get downtown to the Montemart, one of Dallas's older hotels, I dodged cars and checked my makeup in the rearview mirror and noted that at forty-four my eyes were still bright and focused, my hair thick and, while not totally wild, at least parochially punk. Giving myself a smile in the mirror, I looked for lipstick that had gone awry while cognizant that my smile was one of my greatest assets. I used it even when I didn't feel smiley. Perhaps later in life, when all the other parts had worn out, I'd simply arrange to meet people at drive-thrus.

Minutes later, I valet-parked my car and took the elevator along with other people in ridiculous ruffles and rhinestones up to the massive ballroom on the seventeenth floor and the St. Albert Children's Medical Center Fund-raiser. I dutifully smiled at total strangers, spoke warmly to people I purportedly knew, slogged through the buffet line, and found a seat at one of the larger tables where I settled in, nodding at guests on the opposite side of the table who could not have heard me even if I'd introduced myself, thanks to an orchestra that was miked up so loudly we were in danger of otologic collapse. The roast beef shimmered under the chandelier with a greenish-purple iridescence, and I decided against eating it. I was bored, but not suicidal. I settled on a piece of chicken that looked like it had been prepared by the Smithsonian.

Surreptitiously checking my watch under the table, I didn't see a woman in her early forties join me. I glanced up as her plate slid onto the table next to mine, and I recognized her from her television show. She was wearing a tight, electric blue satin dress that enhanced her ample breasts and showed just enough cleavage to make me forget the time. Her short hair was so golden it almost looked eighteen karat, boyish in cut, but just curly enough to be feminine. She had with her a handsome, prosperous-looking man in expensive dress pants and black leather suspenders who was drunk right down to his socks.

"Enjoying the evening? I'm Liz Chase and this is Harry," she said as Harry collapsed into the chair next to me.

"I'm Brice Chandler. Hello." I nodded at Harry, who obviously had no idea where he was.

"I was just wondering if I had to eat this prehistoric fowl before leaving," I remarked as Harry let out a large, dangerous belch that turned into gagging sounds, then escalated to near vomiting. The man adjacent to him snatched him up and hoisted him from the chair, propelling him toward the men's room.

Liz watched the retreating Harry slobbering down his own suit front and pushed her plate away, rolling her eyes in humorous dismay. "I don't think I'll be eating now at all. In fact, I'd like to leave."

"Do you need a ride?" I tried not to make too big a deal out of what had happened, certain Liz Chase would be fine with Harry finding his own way home.

"That would be wonderful."

We both slid discreetly out of our chairs as if headed for the powder room, but instead we dashed through the lobby, wanting to get out before anyone noticed we were in full retreat. I glanced at Liz, assessing her frame of mind, and caught her suppressing a giggle, I assumed over the ridiculous situation she'd found herself in and the near-projectile vomiting of her date. I grinned at her, liking her ability to find humor in embarrassing situations and to roll with the punches—but then that's probably what TV people did.

At valet parking, I handed the young boy my ticket stub, and he dashed for my car. The wind caught Liz's perfume and washed it over me, making me light-headed. Women always smelled so good. It was one of their immediately irresistible qualities. That's what I told myself because my heart was racing in an uncharacteristic pattern as I tipped the sprinter and a second man, who held the car doors open for us.

The moment we settled in, Liz said, “I was watching you tonight. I’ve heard about you forever and never had a chance to meet you. Tonight, I...thought you looked very handsome, powerful, unlike other women.”

That could have been a come-on, but since moving back to Dallas from L.A., I’d found that perfectly straight women often made astonishingly intimate remarks to other women without being at all concerned that they’d compromised their heterosexuality. I thanked her and confessed that while I’d only watched her show occasionally, due to my work schedule, I thought she was very good at what she did.

As we headed north, chatting amicably, she suggested we cut through Turtle Creek. Why we would take the scenic route when it was too dark to see any of the park’s creeks and flowers was a bit mystifying, but I obliged her, thinking it a shortcut. She continued to talk nervously, telling me that the man she was with at the party worked at the television station and his wife had just left him. When I asked why, Liz replied, “Puking in public.” She paused, then we both burst out laughing.

“That’s not true.” I continued to chuckle.

“No, I made that up,” she said, getting control of herself as my heart happily skipped around in my chest. Liz Chase was, in addition to being attractive, a great deal of fun.

I turned left off the main thoroughfare, up the winding hill that in daylight was home to a myriad of flowers.

“Stop here for a minute,” she requested.

I pulled off into a parking indentation and looked at her, wondering if something was wrong.

“It’s taken me a while to even meet you, and with our schedules, who knows if I’ll see you again anytime soon.” She paused and I frowned. “I’m a TV anchor, so I have a lot to lose with what I’m about to say, but I’ve vowed recently that I’m going to trust my instincts and take chances when the outcome matters.” As she stared into my eyes, I felt my heart lurch and a tingling sensation break out somewhere in my lower abdomen.

“I’d like to see you,” she said, then let her breath out in a there-it’s-done kind of way.

It was as if she knew I’d never been good at nuance. So there she was, looking me directly in the eye and asking—*What, to date me? Liz Chase is gay?* That was my first thought, followed immediately by the

ingrained corporate suspicion that for all I knew, maybe she wasn't! *Maybe she's setting me up. Maybe her station is doing an expose on closet execs.*

I found myself physically stiffening, becoming internally tense, my voice rising in cold alarm. "Could you be more explicit?" It was a supercilious response, but I was suddenly nervous in a city with so many closeted executives the skeletons were having to sleep double.

After a beat she answered with a wry smile. "Probably not." She slowly reached toward me, her wrist extending beyond the tight blue satin sleeve of her dress, her fingers long and beautiful stretching out across me for what seemed like eons until they caught the loop of the seat belt by the driver's side door and slowly dragged the strap across my chest, the tips of her fingers brushing my breast. I stopped breathing entirely and thought I might faint.

My reaction wasn't lost on her. She gazed up into my eyes, and I could have taken her in that instant; she was that lovely, and her look was that erotic. The metallic click of the belt into its lock snapped my heart back into my chest and punctuated all that she hadn't said.

"Better buckle up." Her smile carried a warning that went beyond this particular ride. I certainly didn't *want* her out of my car, but I *needed* to get her out of my car. I didn't want to be on the front page of the city's paper under a headline that read TWO PROMINENT WOMEN ARRESTED IN LOCAL PARK.

We drove on in silence. A few blocks later I let Liz off in front of a small but stately two-story brick home in the older part of town. Getting out of the car, she thanked me, her eyes lingering for just an instant on mine, then turned and walked up the steps to her house, and I noticed Liz Chase had a perfectly engineered derriere. Perfectly.



I drove directly across town to a small but neatly kept duplex not far from SMU, my heart pumping out of my chest, my breathing short as I jumped out of the car. Taking the wooden steps two at a time and the porch in two more, I knocked on the paint-peeling white door in search of Madge Mahoney, my university drama coach and longtime confidante, the person I always turned to when I needed guidance.

Madge, approaching a rather liberated seventy, her flaming red hair in wild disarray and wearing a silk Japanese kimono flared at the

bottom and belted at the waist, flung open the door. She spread her arms wide in welcome, as if taking in the entire second-floor balcony instead of just me.

“You shouldn’t open your door to strangers in the middle of the night,” I admonished.

“You should show up occasionally and you wouldn’t be a stranger! Come! Sit! Drink! What can I get you?” She jutted her head forward like an inquisitive turtle and stared, most likely trying to decide what was going on with me at this hour. “You’re too well dressed to be running away from home—”

“Fund-raiser. I left early.”

“—*and* you have a certain glow about you.”

“I gave Liz Chase a ride home.”

“The TV anchor? They don’t pay them well enough to afford a car or cab?” she said slyly, not having had a talk about my love life in quite some time and presumably relishing it since it allowed her to live vicariously—akin to experiencing childbirth without pregnancy. She drifted into the kitchen.

“I’ll have coffee!” I called out.

She appeared moments later and handed me a cup of tea, fully aware I wasn’t a tea drinker and not caring. If Madge drank tea, the world could drink tea. Her repertoire of guest formalities exhausted, she plopped down in her huge leather chair across from me. “So what’s Ms. Chase like? She’s attractive, I know that. I watch her on TV.”

I took off my suit jacket, kicked off my heels, and curled up on the white couch across from the wall of R. C. Gorman prints of Native American women, which in my college days I had viewed as extremely erotic, their black, sleek locks blowing wildly in the wind. In contemplating the artwork, I had delayed too long for Madge, and she ordered me to speak up or go home. I recited the entire evening’s events, and she listened without interruption until I reached the scene at Turtle Creek when Liz’s hand brushed my breast.

“What kind of a woman does that? She doesn’t even know you!” Madge was up on her feet pacing now as if she held the lead in *Medea*. “What if you called the station and reported her? She’s a fool to take that chance.”

“She admitted that, but said—”

“—that she’s crazy and you should stay away from her? I’m

hoping that's what she said!" She threw her arms up to the heavens in supplication of the unseen.

"I *intend* to stay away from her."

"You have a lot to lose too, you know."

"I'm fully aware of that, Madge," I said as she suddenly collapsed into her chair and picked up her tea.

"Living with the dead makes you vulnerable," she warned in a heartless attack on Clare. "If nothing else, this Liz Chase person has revived you. The blood's all up in your head again. You're excited. You're nervous. You're aware that you're alive! What does that tell you about your life?"

"Nothing's wrong with my current relationship. You've just never thought Clare was right for me. You don't see her as sexy," I said dismissively.

"That makes two of us then, doesn't it?" She sipped her tea, eyeing me over the half lens of her glasses.

I looked past her into the dimly lit garden. There was nothing more to say.



I returned that night to Clare's elegant north Dallas estate, the house I shared with her but in which I'd never felt quite at home, in a neighborhood of the near famous whose mansions had undergone as many face-lifts as their occupants. After pulling into the three-car garage, I kept my car doors locked until the electric door was down, an odd safety precaution promoted by the local police, who seemed to think that if a burglar managed to slip into the garage before the door was fully down, it would be best for me to be locked in with him.

My routine was so ingrained that my body could operate on automatic pilot while my mind did other things—enter the house, punch in the code to de-arm the alarm, toss my car keys on the counter, and wander down the long hall to the bedroom where the lights were already out—as my mind wondered what I was still doing here, in this house, in this moment, with this woman.

As I slipped out of my suit and pulled on a silk nightshirt, I glanced at Clare, who was asleep. Crawling into bed with her, I started to draw myself in close to her back and wrap around her long, angular form, but

she somehow sensed my presence and moved away, as if to make room for me, but I felt she was avoiding me.

I'd been attracted to Clare's aristocratic roots, her elitist friends, and of course to her talent as a cellist in the Philadelphia Orchestra and now the Dallas Symphony. If I were honest with myself, she'd been attracted to my liberal leanings in a conservative city and to my status—a highly paid woman executive doing well in a man's world. But now here we were with no executive suite, only our bedroom suite; no orchestra, only the music the two of us could make together. And if we listened honestly, the sound was cacophonous.

I put my hand on her shoulder and asked her to talk to me. She groaned, letting me know she wasn't interested. I knew it was rude to awaken her for mere conversation, but part of me said, like Rabbi Hillel, if not now, when? Clare was either in rehearsal at the Meyerson Symphony Center, in practice in the living room, or driving between the two.

"We never really fell in love, you know. We merely got involved—ended up in bed together," I said, starting in the middle of the long conversation I had been having in my head. I wanted to add that because of that emotional accident, a hereditary heterosexual DNA-imprinting had kicked in, and without analyzing it, we took the obligatory sequential steps: calling each other lover, moving in together, sharing property—a sort of self-inflicted shotgun wedding for the terminally gay.

"Why are you waking me up?" She frowned, looking at the clock. "It's past midnight."

"The way we are isn't working," I said quietly in my direct way. "You and I aren't really connected. I feel alone. I might as well be living alone."

She studied me dispassionately. "Have you met someone?"

"No. But I do think I'm vulnerable to meeting someone because we share so little."

She rose up on one elbow and pivoted slightly, addressing me over her shoulder. "I think we make a good team, actually." She spoke in that removed way she talked about us.

"Athletes make a good team. Horses make a good team. Lovers have to make more." My tone was flat.

"It's the sex thing again, isn't it? I don't need it in my life the way you do."

“Sex is not an act. Sex is a language that communicates love for one another. That said, you and I haven’t spoken in a very long time.” I felt calm now. It was out.

Clare paused for several beats, then turned her back to me and went to sleep.