

Michael and Claire

by Kate Simon

When was he going to learn not to drink so much? Michael Morgan rolled over on bed and reached for his watch. Seven a.m. He was going to have to get up and get going. At least the woman was gone. He barely remembered her from the party at Jake's. He promised himself he'd get to Monahan's place before anyone else could get a chance to meet with the daughter. Monahan had died the week before from a bad heart, at least that was the story. In his line of work, a bad heart could be the result of a bullet.

Monahan was a stubborn old bird who'd refused to sell out to 'the likes of him'. Pretty arrogant for a Mc straight off the boat. Not that his family was that much better. He was second generation at least that's what he was told. His mother was so obnoxiously proud of her parents coming over in the first wave. He didn't know what she was so damn proud of. Dirt poor farmers come to New York to become dirt poor factory workers.

Michael swore that would never be him.

Claire Monahan looked out the window toward the manicured lawn. Beyond the tree line was the lake where she'd spent so many happy days. She couldn't believe he was gone. She and her Da had worked side by side almost her whole life. They came over from County Mayo when Claire was only seven. Ma had died from a fever leaving Patrick Monahan to raise his girl alone. They'd had nothing when they arrived. Da had worked as a mason for years until he'd started his own business. He moved his girl to the country when she was twelve buying an abandoned estate and turning it into a showpiece. As his business grew he taught Claire everything he knew. Her head for numbers had served them well. They'd built this together and now he was gone.

She set her grief aside and sat down at her desk reviewing the books. Their project Glen Meadow was going well. Homes were being built on a large tract of farmland Da had picked up for a song. He'd always had a knack for knowing where to build. Now, it was up to her.

Michael checked his vest in the mirror. He knew he looked good, he'd never had trouble with ladies. He'd showered off the remains of the party and the woman from the night before. He found not smelling like cheap perfume was preferable when meeting a woman. He made sure his tie was straight and his hair was trimmed. He touched the gray at his temples. It was to be expected at his age but to him, it reminded him of thirty five years of hard work.

He didn't know what he was going up against with Monahan's old maid daughter. All he knew was Monahan own the property on Crane Lake he wanted. The casino resort he had planned would be the biggest project of his career. He'd worked since he was ten years old, hauling, cleaning, anything he do to support his mother after his poor excuse for a father drank himself to death. Once he'd gotten an in with the construction union he'd never looked back. He'd learned everything he could until he struck out on his own. He'd worked and struggled and fought for years, turning his small business one of the biggest construction companies in the state. The only one bigger was Monahan.

Michael knocked on the door of the Monahan home. It was a massive thing he thought was showy. He preferred his townhome. It had everything he needed, a kitchen, a bar and a king size bed. A woman wearing a grey uniform answered the door.

"Yes?"

"I'm here to see Miss Monahan."

"Are you now? Who are you?"

"Michael Morgan."

She looked him up and down. "Wait here." She came back a moment later. "She's in the office." She cocked her head toward the open door.

Michael walked into the office and saw a something he never expected, a beautiful woman. Her jet black hair was pinned up off her face. Crystal blue eyes sized him up. He wondered briefly if he measured up to whatever standard she using.

"Miss Monahan?"

She closed the file on her desk. "Yes. What can I do for your Mr. Morgan?"

He had no idea why her brogue surprised and delighted him but it did. "I didn't say

my name. How do you know me?"

"I know who you are Mr. Morgan. Anyone in our business knows who you are. Now, as much as dislike repeating myself, what can I do for you?"

He fought to collect his thoughts. "I'm here to pay my respects on the passing of your father."

"I highly doubt that," she said with a smile that put him off balance.

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you've been trying to buy the Crane Lake property for months."

"I have an excellent offer for the property Ms. Monahan. If you'll give me the name of the new company president, I will present him my offer."

She smiled and closed the file she was reading. "That would be me."

"What? You're a woman."

"Thank you for noticing but I am the president of Monahan Construction." She rose and walked around her desk. "I own every nail, every truck, every square foot of board." She walked close enough that he could smell lavender. She spoke quietly. "Everything you see belongs to me. I intend to keep it that way."

Michael saw a look in her eyes that reminded him of school yard boys goading him into a fight. Instead of taking her bait, he held his ground. He smiled and spoke as softly as she had. "Miss Monahan, I have an excellent offer for the property. Your father wouldn't even listen to it. I hope you will be more open to such an opportunity."

She laughed. "You aren't used to hearing 'no'. Do you always get what you want?"

He smiled. "Yes, I do."

"Then I'd say you're in for a change of fortune." She smiled as she turned and sat on the edge of her desk. "I'll tell you why my father wouldn't look at your offer. You have a reputation, Mr. Morgan."

He smiled.

"That wasn't a compliment. You have a reputation for getting what you want by any means possible, including busting heads and bribing officials."

"I do what what's needed to get the job done."

"At what price, Mr. Morgan? You take what you want but you're always looking over your shoulder. Looking for the next betrayal. Looking for the next lug with a pipe wrench

to smash you over the head and take what's yours. My father and I built this company honestly. We worked hard and hired good people. We paid them a living wage, gave them pensions. It took longer, but I'm not looking over my shoulder."

She held out her hand. For a moment, he wanted to take it and pull her close.

"The proposal ? I assume you have it on you?"

"Yes." He pulled the folder pages out of his jacket and handed it to her.

"I'll review it. If I want to discuss it further I'll contact you." She turned and sat back down behind her desk. "I believe that concludes our business."

"For now," he smiled.

Michael stood outside on the front step and wondered what the hell had just happened. He'd been dismissed. By a woman. One hell of a woman. He found himself smiling. This was going to be interesting.

Claire waited until she heard the front door close before she released the breath she'd been holding. She knew of Michael Morgan. He'd come up from nothing, just like they had. Da said he was a thug, ruthless and not to be trusted. But she saw something when she looked into his eyes. Something that made her want to know more. Made her want what she couldn't have. She'd have to ensure those beautiful blue eyes wouldn't cost her everything.

Michael drove his Packard up the drive to the Monahan house, reviewing every possible objection the Monahan woman could have. Damn woman had let him stew for a full week. It was a sound plan if she would just sell him the damn land.

The same woman in the same grey uniform answered the door. "It's you again."

"So it would seem," he smiled.

"I'll tell the Miss you're here."

The woman put her head in the door and shouted, "That Morgan fella is here again. I can't be opening the door every five minutes if you expect me to get my work done."

"Thank you, Patricia. Please tell him to come in."

The woman nodded toward the door as she walked back to whatever work she felt was so important.

"Miss Monahan, I was surprised to get your call."

"I'm a business woman, Mr. Morgan. I reviewed your plans and I found them to be sound. Your proposal to give Monahan Construction ten percent over the going rate for land and timber for the hotel was interesting."

Michael sat back in his chair and smiled. Maybe this Monahan was more reasonable than her father. "I will have my attorney draft the contracts."

"Not so fast, Mr. Morgan. I never said I accepted your offer."

"What? You just said..."

"I said your proposal was interesting. I believe you're correct in your assessment of the wealthy of New York wanting to escape the city. This will resort will provide the rustic environment while still catering to their needs."

"If you think it's such a good idea what's the problem?"

"No problem. I won't sell you the land."

"What? Did you call me out here to tell me that? You know I can't proceed until you sell me the land. Did you want to rub it in my face?"

She smiled and rose from behind her desk. She moved to the side and sat on the edge of the desk. She was wearing a deep blue dress that showed off her curves to their best advantage, not to mention what it did for her legs. He was sure she's worn it to throw

him off balance. It was working, damn her. He smiled. Two could play that game.

"I'll not sell you the land. What I propose is a partnership. Fifty, Fifty. I will have equal input on the design. You will use an equal number of Monahan employees along with the Morgan employees. Judging from the scope of what you've outlined there will be plenty of work for all."

He jumped to his feet. "Partnership? With a woman?"

"No, Mr. Morgan. A partnership with the largest construction firm in the state of New York. Come now, Mr. Morgan. Are you going to let the fact that I'm a female keep you from pursuing your dream?"

Michael looked at her for what felt like forever. She was right. Damn her. She was just a woman. He'd handled the toughest union bosses in New York. Handling her would be no problem. He allowed himself to smile as he extended his hand. "It looks like you have a partner."

She took his hand and held it. She looked into his eyes like a cat toying with a mouse. "Not quite, Mr. Morgan. This project will be on the up and up. No bribes, no violence. I'll have none of it. The first sign of it and it's over, all of it. I have a reputation to protect. Also, I will handle the books. I'll not have anything that's mine taken from me."

Michael knew he should walk away from this deal. This woman was going to be nothing but trouble. But if he was going through with this he'd have to show her who's in charge. "It looks like we have a deal." He moved closer, enjoying her lavender scent. Still holding her hand he spoke softly. "I give you my word, Miss Monahan. I will not take anything from you that you are not willing to give."

Her crystal blue eyes challenged him but he saw something else that made him smile, desire. He brushed his hand gently across her cheek and he saw the passion in her eyes flair. Or maybe it was just a reflection of his own. He leaned in and touched his lips to hers. His heart beat in triple time when she met his kiss not with a slap but an equally gentle kiss. He finally felt her hand on his chest pushing him back.

"No," she whispered. She stepped aside and tried to return to her desk. He moved to stop her.

"You can't tell me you don't want this," he whispered.

She smiled. "I never said that. All I said was no." She returned to her chair and

pulled a file from her desk. "I've had this drawn up. Have your lawyers review it. I've already signed it. That will conclude our business for today, Mr. Morgan."

"Michael."

"Excuse me?"

"If we're going to be partners you should call me Michael," he smiled. He turned to leave and as he reached for the door he heard "Claire."

Oh, yes. This was going to be interesting.

If anyone told Michael three months ago that he'd be business partners with a woman he'd have told them they were crazy. If they'd told him he'd actually enjoy it he'd have decked them. The truth of the matter was Claire was a damn fine businesswoman. Although he'd never tell her that. Her ideas about a spa for the women were spot on. He stood in the middle of the excavated plot that would be the wine cellar. This wasn't just another project, this was his dream. He would run this place himself. No more sweating for every dime. Once the resort was finished it would be nothing but the finest cigars and best whiskey.

He'd come up to the house for his weekly meeting with Claire. They'd review the progress of the project, make any needed adjustments to the schedule and go over the books. He was surprised to find her office door closed. He knocked before he opened the door. "Claire?" Michael found her staring out the bay window toward the garden. "Claire?" he repeated.

She turned and smiled. "Oh, hello Michael. I'm sorry, I didn't hear you come in."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Michael. Just feeling a bit wistful today." She glanced out at the garden. "Da was so proud of the garden. Said it was something my mother would have loved." He came up behind her to see her view. "You see that oak tree? I remember climbing it when I was twelve, near up to the top. Of course it wasn't near as tall back then. Da was so mad. Said I'd break my neck. Did you climb trees, Michael?"

"Nah. When I was twelve I was running numbers for the local bookie."

She turned and put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. So what's got you so turned around today."

"It was just the two of us for so long and now it's just me. I miss him terribly, especially today." Claire turned and moved to her desk. "But that's alright. It's the price I pay now for being so loved then." She flipped open the file in front of her. "Shall we get down to business."

"What's today?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"You said especially today. What's today?"

Claire said back against her leather chair and sighed. "Today's my birthday. Every year on my birthday my da would set a proper tea for me. Even when we had nothing and all he could manage was a pot of weak tea and a biscuit or two. We'd tell stories and sing songs. Even when we had nothing it was still the best day of the year. Better than Christmas."

Michael looked at her soft smile and thought about how he'd gotten used to having her in his life. He felt something for her that he felt for few people, respect. "Do you have a teapot?" he asked.

Claire laughed, "I'm an Irish girl from County Mayo, God Bless it. Of course I have a tea pot."

"Where?"

"Where you keep teapots. The kitchen."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. "Come along."

"Michael what are you doing?"

"We are going to have a proper birthday tea for you."

"You know how to set a proper tea?"

He clutched his chest with feigned insult. "I'm an Irish man, the grandson of people from County Kilkenny. Of course I know how." He spotted a china teapot on the counter and pulled it toward the stove. He added water to the metal teapot on the stove and set the light. "I haven't done it in a while, but I still know how," he added. Claire sat at the kitchen table, smiling as he searched the kitchen, finding the tea and strainer. "Biscuits?" he asked. She pointed to a cabinet next the icebox. He held up a tin. "Shortbread?"

"Perfect."

Claire smiled and his heart skipped. When had her smile become so important? He warmed the pot before setting the tea strainer in the pot. He poured the boiling water in the warmed pot. While it steeped he found a plate for the shortbread. He pulled two cups out of the china closet and set them on the table. He found some cream and sugar and set them next to the shortbread.

"I am truly impressed, Michael. Your gran would be proud."

"Thank you. But if you ever tell anyone about this I will deny it to my dying day."

Michael and Claire drank the tea and ate the shortbread. She told him about her memories of Ireland. He told her a story about falling down a coal shoot and having to be hosed down outside in the middle of winter before his mother would let him back in the apartment. They talked and laughed until the pot grew cold.

"You never told me which birthday it is," said Michael

Claire rolled her eyes. "I'm officially an old woman now. I'm forty. Lord, that happened so fast. It feels like yesterday I was climbing up that tree."

Michael put his hand over hers. "You are most definitely not old. You're a beautiful woman. I won't have you thinking different."

She laughed and shook her head. "Oh really?"

He held her hand a bit tighter and said quietly, "Really."

Claire followed Michael to the sink with the dishes and smiled. "I have to say Mr. Morgan ya set a proper tea." The only thing missing was the singing.

"Oh you don't want that. I only really know the one song. My grandmother made me sing it to her when she was missing Ireland." He started washing dishes and Claire grabbed a dish towel.

"Sing it for me, Michael, please."

He looked at her and realized he would never deny her anything. He took the towel from her and dried his hands. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

*Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling
From glen to glen and down the mountain side
The summer's gone and the flowers are dying
It's you, It's you must go and I must bide
But come ye back when summer's in the meadow
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow
I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow
Oh, Danny boy, Oh, Danny boy, I love you so.*

He stopped singing and saw tears in her eyes. "I didn't think it was bad enough to bring you to tears."

Claire touched her hand to his cheek. "That was beautiful. Thank you, Michael, for giving me a wonderful birthday. She leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss. She pulled back and Michael knew everything had changed. He pulled her close and kissed her the way he'd wanted to that first day. Before he lost himself completely he stopped. "Claire, I told you I would never take anything from you weren't will to give. If you mean to say no, you need to say it now." Claire smiled, took his hand and led him up the stairs.

Claire closed the door behind them and gave him a nervous smile. "Michael, please kiss me again."

He smiled, delighted to comply. He deepened the kiss and slid his hand to her hair. He pulled several pins and whispered, "I've always wanted to see your hair down." She smiled and walked to her vanity. She pulled the rest of the pins from her hair and loosened with her fingers. "So beautiful." He slipped his hands around her waist and kissed her neck. "Ah, Claire, you're so beautiful." She gasped as he reached for the zipper of her dress and pulled it down. He slid her dress down her shoulders until it pooled at her feet. He ran his hands over the silk of her slip. He could tell how nervous she was and the last thing he wanted to do was frighten her. He turned her to face him. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll take care of you."

"I know you will," she whispered .

Michael led her to the bed and pulled down the covers. She gasped when he picked her up in his arms and set her on the bed. He took off all his clothes except his boxers and was gratified to see her smile. He kissed her as he climbed into her bed. Taking his time, his kisses moved from her lips to her neck. His kisses turned to gentle nips. The sound of her gasps delighted him.

He reached his hands under her slip and pulled her panties off. Michael took his time with her, touching her, pleasing her while still leaving most of her covered. Finally, the look in her eyes told him she was ready. When he slid the rest of the silk from her body it was his turn to gasp. "My God," he whispered. "So beautiful."

Waiting was not longer an option. Michael pulled off his boxers and covered her with his body. He tried to go slow despite being driven nearly mad with wanting her. He kissed her deeply as he slid carefully inside her, marveling how her body held him in a

tight grasp. He felt her gasp in his mouth when he was deep. He looked into her eyes and whispered, "My God, Claire. So good." Slow and careful was gone, replaced by fast and desperate. He slid his hand between the and coaxed her to the edge. When she came apart under him, he followed.

He stared at the ceiling as Claire curled next to him, her hand on his chest. It took him time to recover his senses. His mind was swirling with thoughts he didn't understand. If Claire was any other woman he'd have been out the door by now. Claire was not any other woman. Two thoughts finally came to rest in mind. First, he was in love with Claire Monahan. Second, until tonight, she'd been a virgin.

"Claire," he whispered.

"Yes," she purred.

Michael turned and propped himself on his shoulder. "Claire, why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"That you'd never done this before."

She blushed and pulled the sheet up over her breasts. "It's not the sort of thing a woman talks about."

"Why now?"

She chuckled. "I thought forty years was long enough to wait. God knows if anyone would ever ask me again."

He stroked her cheek and kissed her. "How is this possible. You're a very beautiful woman and you're surrounded by men?"

Claire smiled. "Thank you but until a few months ago I worked side by side with my father. The men knew not to come near me. Those who didn't were quickly informed by the others. Sometimes I thought about it, when I saw the men with their wives and children. But I had a happy life, Michael. I wouldn't change it if I could."

"Why me?" he whispered.

She gently touched his cheek. "Because you're a good man."

Michael exploded with laughter. "Hah. I've been called many things but no one has ever accused me of that."

"You are a good man, Michael. I saw it in your eyes that first day. I saw the good man, waiting to come out. He's the man who gave me a chance to prove I'd be a good business partner. He's the man who showed me respect in front of his men so they would respect me." Her voiced struggled with emotion. "He's the man who set me a perfect birthday tea and sang Danny Boy to me. He's the man in my bed right now. There is a good man in you but most of the time you keep him locked away. I hope one day you will let him out for good." She gave him the sweetest of kisses. "I hope I will see that day."

For the first time in his life Michael was at a loss for words. All he could do was love her.

Claire lay in the dark, listening to Michael's breathing. She didn't know what she'd expected but it was nothing like the reality of being with Michael. Da had told her men could be rough beasts and she was better off without one. From watching some of the men who worked for them she thought Da might have been right. She'd never given it much thought, that was until she'd met Michael Morgan. Now it was all she could think about.

"Why aren't you asleep?" whispered Michael.

"I'm just thinking."

He rolled on his side and asked, "About what?"

"About you."

He pushed a stray lock of hair from her face. "Is that so?" he said as he kissed her. "What are you thinkin' 'bout me, Miss Monahan," he said in a fair brogue.

"I'm thinking how happy I am it was you."

Michael was glad it was dark so Claire couldn't clearly see his face. He'd stopped counting the women he'd been with when he was still in his teens. It was always nothing more than a good time that was forgotten quickly the next day. Nothing in his life had ever been like this. Love. It wasn't just a word anymore. He knew what it was now. He also knew the pain of it. No matter what fancy suit he wore or new car he drove, he was still a street urchin from Hell's Kitchen. He would never be the good man she needed him to be. Michael pulled her close and kissed her, not wanting to let the world back in. Not yet.

Claire turned and glanced at the glowing alarm clock that read four a.m. "Good Lord, is that the time?"

"It's still nighttime, girl. Now kiss me."

"No, you have to go."

A slap in the face would have hurt less. "Why?" he asked, afraid of the answer.

"The foremen will be here for their assignments by six. You can't be here." She tried to stand but he pushed himself over her pinning her to the bed.

"So you're ashamed of taking me to your bed?" he said.

"Michael no. I meant every word I've said. But you have to know how hard it is for these men to answer to a woman, let alone respect her."

"It's none of their business who you take to your bed. They work for you, not the other way around."

"Michael, these are old school Irish Catholic men, some just come over. If the men saw you like this they would slap you on the back and smile, but not me. If they caught their daughters like this they'd disown them, toss them in the streets. It's taken me years of hard work earn their respect. If they find you here I will lose all of it. Please Michael, please don't ask me to let that happen."

"Fine," he growled as he got out of bed and grabbed for his clothes. He got dressed and slammed the bedroom door behind him. As he hurried down the stairs he stopped long enough to hear her sobbing.

Michael looked at himself in the mirror and shook his head. "You're an ass," he said to his reflection. "You know she's right." He still believed he'd never be good enough for her but he could at least show her he didn't blame her. He'd gotten home around four thirty but couldn't sleep. He finally jumped in the shower and got ready to go out to the project site.

Michael walked into the diner where he'd been having breakfast for the last ten years. He sat at his regular booth, which was always set ready for him. He opened his paper and turned to the racing form. Old habits die hard.

"Good morning, Mr. Morgan."

He glanced up from his paper to see Dottie, a busty blonde in her thirties smiling as she poured his coffee. She was a spirited thing. He'd had her a couple of times in the back room.

"Morning, Dottie."

"Your eggs will just be a moment, we're running short handed today."

Michael knew she was telling him they wouldn't be disturbed. "He smiled. "That's fine, Dottie, but I do need to get to my site."

Dottie frowned, understanding he was telling her no. "Fine," she huffed as she walked through the door to the kitchen.

Michael looked at the swinging door and then back at his paper. He'd just turned down a hot piece. He'd never done that. Ever. What the hell was wrong with him? The thought of being with Dottie did nothing for him. She wasn't Claire.

He knew what Claire said was true, every word of it. Lord, he hated that she was always right. If he ever appeared with her publicly it would destroy her reputation. He, on the other hand, had no good name to lose. After he grabbed some breakfast he'd make one more stop.

Claire sat at her desk staring at a page of the accounts book without really seeing the numbers. Her eyes were still red from crying and the aspirin she had done nothing for her headache. She heard a knock at the door and she pulled herself up straight. "Come in."

Patricia walked in carry a large bouquet of mixed flowers in a vase. There were a few white roses mixed with iris and bell flowers. "These came for you," she said as set them on Claire's desk. "Looks like someone remembered your birthday." Claire looked at her with surprise. Patricia gave her a rare smile. "Girl, I've worked in this house for twenty years. I didn't say anything yesterday being the first one without your Da and all, but happy birthday."

Claire stood and gave the old woman a hug. "Thank you, Patricia." She waited until she was alone until she looked at the card. She smiled when she recognized the writing. All the card said,

I understand.

M

She smiled, feeling the weight on her heart lifting. She unlocked a drawer in her desk and secured the card inside.

Michael spent the day at the site, making sure the men were doing the work as he'd instructed. There could be no short cuts. He wanted it perfect and he'd settle for nothing less. He walked into the foyer and was stunned to see it looked exactly the same as it had last week. "What the hell is going on, John?"

Her foreman John Tyler came out from behind what was to be the reception desk. He was a beefy man in his late fifties, brown skinned and thick muscled from decades of working outside. "Hello, Mr. Morgan."

"Save it, John. Where the hell is the fucking marble? Half this lobby should be laid by now."

"It hasn't been delivered yet. The Monahan woman said it was delayed."

"Miss Monahan."

"Huh?"

"Miss Monahan," he growled.

"Yes, sir. Miss Monahan said it was delayed."

"Fine. I'll look into it. Get back to work."

Michael jumped into his car and flew down the road. He would not tolerate any interruptions in his project, not even from Claire.

He pushed the front door open, stormed straight into her office and slammed the door. "Where the hell is my marble?" he shouted.

Claire looked up at him and set her pen down. "Good afternoon, Michael. How are you today?"

"Where the hell is my marble?" he repeated.

She stood and walked around her desk. "You wanted the best Italian marble and that's what I ordered." She walked towards him and poked a finger at his chest. "If you read anything but the sports page you would know there had been a terrible storm at sea last week, so the shipment was delayed. It will arrive at the dock tomorrow. You will have your precious marble by Wednesday."

"Any other important facts you want to tell me about, Miss Monahan or is that all?"

"No that's not all," she said, frustrated hands on her hips.

"What else?" he asked.

"Thank you for the flowers," she yelled.

"You're welcome," he said louder than he intended. His control snapped and he took her face in his hands. He took possession of her lips and she surrendered them willingly. "Damn it, Claire," he whispered. "I have no control around you and it's driving me mad." He kissed her again. "I don't want to walk away from you," he whispered. "I don't think I can."

"I don't want you to," Claire whispered as she kissed his neck.

He smiled and sighed. He knew he'd lost the war, but he no longer cared. "I guess we'll just have to be careful."

They spent the next few weeks tussling in public, arguing over the details of the construction. First it was the delayed marble, then it was overages on timber. They'd argue like partners during the day and made up like lovers at night. Each night Michael would sneak out before dawn. He knew this was getting risky. Not because he'd get caught, but

because it was getting impossible to hide from what he felt for her.

Claire drove out to the lake to find him. This was getting out of hand. Michael had made changes to the plans that would cost thousands. He was supposed to consult her on any major decisions. She had just as much invested in the project as he had. She pulled into the site and found Patrick Ryan, Michael's foreman, at the entrance to unfinished hotel.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

Patrick smiled, "What did he do now?"

"Why are we moving the pool? It's already been dug. Why do I have bills for filling it and digging another giant hole in the ground?"

"He's on the top floor talking to the electrician." He looked at a scruffy young man cleaning up a pile of scrap lumber. "Freddy. Go find the boss and tell him Miss Monahan would like to speak with him." The boy nodded and ran off.

Claire paced back and forth while she waited for Michael's appearance.

"Don't be too hard on him, Miss. He hasn't had to answer to anyone since he was twelve."

Claire stopped her pacing. "What do you mean?"

"I've known Michael since we were kids. He's been making his own way since his Ma died. Consumption, I think."

"Who took him after she died?"

"Took him?"

"Who did he live with? Who raised him?"

"No one. He took care of himself which why he's so pigheaded. I was surprised when he agreed to you being a partner. Michael Morgan has always gone his own way."

"What is it, Miss Monahan? I have work to do." Michael walked into the foyer, his suit covered in a layer of sawdust.

Claire shook off the urge to take him in her arms and thrust the invoices at him. "What is this? Why wasn't I informed about the pool?"

"There was a giant slab of shale at the first location. We couldn't have known it was

there until we dug. We moved it to the other side of the deck without too many alterations to the original design."

Claire huffed with exasperation. That's fine, Mr. Morgan but you have to tell me these things. Please stop forgetting you have a partner."

"How can I forget with you always underfoot to remind me," he exclaimed. He leaned in and whispered, "We'll settle this tonight?"

She gave him a wicked grin. "Of course," she said softly. "Underfoot am I? Well I have other projects to oversee. I don't have time to be running down here." She turned on her heels and stormed past Patrick who was grinning for ear to ear. She heard him chuckle.

"She's a fiery one, boss," said Patrick.

"Yeah, and she's burning my ass," Michael growled. "I don't pay you to stand around. Get back to work."

Patrick laughed loud enough for Claire to hear as she opened the door to her car.

Michael parked his car in the out building and came in through the back. He always waited until after five when Patricia went home for the night. He found Claire in the kitchen setting a meal for them both. She set down the plates and slipped her arms around his waist. He gave her a deep kiss followed by a quick slap on the ass.

"What was that for?" she laughed.

"For letting Patrick see me getting bested by you."

"I'll never best you, Michael Morgan." She kissed him again, making them forget about the dinner until it started to boil over. Claire ran to the stove and turned off the flames. Michael sat the table while Claire served. Nothing fancy, left over pot roast and some vegetables. Sitting across the table from her made it taste better than a steak at the Plaza.

"Michael, why didn't you ever tell me about your mother?"

"Tell you what?"

"Patrick told me she died when you were a boy."

"Patrick should learn to keep his trap shut."

She reached her hand across the table and took his. "Where did you go?"

"What is this Claire? It was a very long time ago."

"I didn't mean to upset you. What Patrick told me startled me. I can't imagine what it was like for you, to fend for yourself when you were just a child."

Michael tossed his napkin on the table. "I don't need your pity." He pushed himself away from the table and stood to leave.

Claire grabbed his arm and forced him to look at her. "I feel no pity for you, Michael Morgan. What I feel is compassion for the little boy who had to be so frightened but survived. I feel admiration for you. You pulled yourself up from nothing with no help from anyone. I had my Da to care for me." She put her hands on his chest. "I think you are a great man, Michael Morgan."

"Why would you say such a thing? I'm a street kid from Hell's Kitchen. You're the lady in the manor house."

Claire dropped her hands. "You don't know me at all, do you? Why would I say such a thing? Because I'm in love with you," she whispered.

Michael stood frozen, watching her tears fall.

"I've been in love with you from the very first day. You walked into my office all full of swagger. She smiled a bit. "Oh and your lovely broad shoulders, and your beautiful blue eyes. I knew the moment I looked into your eyes that my heart was lost to me forever. It's yours now, it will never be mine again." She turned away and reached for a napkin to try her tears.

Listening to her weep, something broke inside him. It would never work, he knew that. But for right now she was here, and she loved him. He closed the gap between them in one move and pulled her face to his. One day he'd have to learn to live without her. But not today.

Claire stood at the window looking at the garden. It was so beautiful, everything was in bloom. She smiled at her climbing tree. How could things have changed so much so fast? It was a warm day but she felt chilled. Maybe a pot of tea was in order.

It had been three days since she'd told Michael she loved him. He hadn't been back to the house. She supposed it was for the best. She was going to have to make some changes and it would be best if she started now.

Michael tried to stay away. He wanted to make a clean break for her sake. He poured himself into the work, making sure everything was done right and picking up the tools himself if it wasn't. Working himself to exhaustion hadn't helped. He laid awake all night thinking of her. He had to see her. He had to find out if he could be the good man she deserved.

"Miss Monahan?"

Claire turned from the window to see her foreman John standing in the doorway.

"What is it, John?"

"Well, another one who got up on the wrong side of the bed." He walked in to her office and tossed his dirty cap on her sofa. "I came to talk to you about Morgan. He's gone crazy driving everyone to finish. When he doesn't like what'd being done he does it himself. The men are angry. I warned you about working with the likes of him. Your Da didn't trust him, but you wouldn't listen. The men are talking it's a woman."

"What are you talking about?" said Claire as she walked toward John.

"He's been sweet as penny candy for months, smiling, laughing, nothing set him off. Now last three days he's been growling and barking like a mad dog. Only one thing drives a man that mad, a woman."

"That's no way to talk about Mr. Morgan." She tried to get to her desk but John grabbed her arm.

"God in heaven, it's you."

"Get your hand off me," she yelled.

He started to laugh, holding his grip. "It is you. Well what do you know? St. Claire

finally came down off her high horse. And you gave it to a thug like Morgan. Well, sweetheart, let's see what's got Morgan in such a twist."

Michael didn't bother to park in the outbuilding, it was too early. One of her workman's trucks was in the driveway so there was no point. He closed the car door and tried to collect his thoughts. What the hell was he going to say to her? All he knew for certain was he needed to see her. Then he heard it. A blood curdling scream. He sprinted into the house and through the office door. He saw her foreman John had her pinned against her desk, trying to pull up her skirt.

Michael shouldn't have been able to move the man. He had at least eighty pounds on him. But move him he did. He grabbed him from behind and pulled him to the ground. He hit a coffee table, shattering it to kindling. Michael drove his hand into the man's face hard enough to hear the bones breaking. He pulled back for a second shot when he saw blood pouring from the man's nose. He'd done enough. He turned toward Claire. "Are you alright? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm alright, Michael," she said in a choked voice.

"Stand up," he ordered as he pulled the man to his feet. "I'll hold him, you call the police."

"No."

"What? He attacked you." Michael saw her take a breath as she tried to calm herself.

"John, I've known you half my life. I know your wife and children. That you could do this," she shook her head. "You're done here. You'll get your things and go. But I won't shame your family by cutting you off so I'm going to let you keep your pension."

"This is insane. He should be in jail."

"I'll let you keep your pension on two conditions. First, you will tell no one what happened here. You've decided to retire. That's all. Second, if I ever lay eyes on you again I won't mind if Mr. Morgan continues what he started. Now get out."

Michael released John who snatched up his hat and fled. He turned back to Claire, "Why the hell..." Claire crumbled into his arms sobbing. "Sweetheart are you hurt?" She shook her head and sobbed into his jacket. He handed her his handkerchief as she dried

her eyes. She handed it back and whispered her thanks.

"Do you still want to buy my company?"

"What?"

"You tried to buy out my father several times. Do you still want it? I'll sell it to you."

"Why would you do that?"

"John said the men figured out that you were upset over a woman. When he realized it was me he said he wanted his share. It won't be long before the rest of them figure it out too."

Claire began to weep again then got a strange look and darted from the room. Michael followed her to the first floor bathroom where she began to vomit. He stood helpless in the doorway until she stood and rinsed out her mouth several times. She looked at him with the saddest eyes he'd ever seen.

"I'm pregnant."

"What?"

"I thought I was too old for such a thing but apparently not. I'll sell out and move. California maybe."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded and began to cry again. "Damn it!" she yelled as she waved her hand asking for his handkerchief again. "Yes, I'm sure. I saw Doctor Foster today. He confirmed what I suspected. Then he told me how ashamed my father would be and I should look for another doctor." She gasped through the tears. "One that treated whores." She dissolved again he pulled her close.

"Come with me," he said as he led her back to the office and sat her on the couch. He took her hand and kissed it.

"You're not selling."

"What? Why? I have to. And why are you smiling?"

"You're not selling. This is your company and you're the one to run it. After we come back from our honeymoon." He smiled at her, he couldn't help it. "I love you, Claire. That's what I was coming here to tell you. I've loved you from that first day." He kissed her softly. "You with your spine of pure steel," He brushed her cheek. "and your skin of pure ivory. My God, woman you were so beautiful you took my breath away."

Claire laughed.

"'Tis true, woman. I was so smitten I let you talk me into making you my partner." He took her hand. "I'm a thug from the streets, Claire Monahan. I can dress up in a fancy suit and drive a fancy car, but nothing can change that," he said quickly. "Lord, I'm not saying this well. You see what I mean, Claire? I'm an ignorant nobody. But I love you more than anything in this world. I would try to be a good husband to you and a good father to our child, if you'll have me that is."

Claire smiled and Michael dared to hope. "I have one condition on this new partnership, Mr. Morgan."

"What is that, Miss. Monahan?"

"You have a reputation Mr. Morgan. You're a very handsome man and the women, well."

Now it was Michael's turn to laugh.

"I'm serious, Michael. Once we take vows, there'll be no other women. You have to promise me that. I couldn't bear that."

"Claire, since the moment I met you, there has been no other woman and there never will be. It's seems you aren't the only one who lost your heart that day."

The honeymoon had been quiet, at an inn upstate. Michael wanted to take Claire to Europe but seasickness added to morning sickness would have been too much. They'd been back a few weeks and were settling into a happy routine. Claire wasn't showing yet so she was still working, with the promise that she take a nap mid day. Patricia was delighted to see she complied.

Michael was standing on a corner in a nice section of the city, smoking an excellent cigar. An older man, late fifties in a bowler hat carrying a leather bag rounded the corner. Michael stepped away from the wall. "Excuse me sir, would you be Dr. Foster?"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

Michael smiled and drove his fist into the man's face. He dropped like a stone on the sidewalk. He stepped over the bleeding man, still smoking his very fine cigar. He chuckled to himself. "You can take the boy out of the street, but you can't take the street out of the boy."