

Power that Binds

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***POWER  
THAT  
BINDS***

Alyce Holmes

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**To the Memory**

**Of My Mother**

**Maxie Rene Holmes**

**The Lady of the Yellow Rose**

**Forever My Light**

**And Inspiration**

## ***POWER THAT BINDS***

Eager travelers scurried through the crowded Atlanta airport, one of the busiest flight centers in the continental United States, merging vast regions of the north and south. Within its walls thousands of sojourners were served in the course of a single day. Manners were cast aside and eyes were focused as globetrotting vacationers and business people arrived in hordes, fighting their way through long lines at ticket counters, car rental booths and terminal gates.

A graceful, young woman claimed her place in the security line. At five foot, six her slim body was elegantly attired in tailored pants and a matching jacket. The open collar of a blue silk blouse revealed the supple curve of her neck and throat. A coat was casually draped over her arm; slender fingers held a pair of long, leather boots and one socked foot slid a briefcase forward as the line advanced.

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Rich ebony hair framed a face with high cheekbones and full lips. Those lips were set in a grim line before she pulled off her rings and watch and threw them in the plastic tub on the conveyor belt. She walked through the arch of the security field and was rewarded by its silence. As she pushed her jewelry into place and stepped back into her shoes, the operator's eyes scanned her lowered profile with unmasked appreciation.

Slanted emerald eyes rose to meet the attendant's tenacious leer. A perk brow arched in mockery as she lifted her bag to her shoulder and turned away. The cut of those eyes caused the man's smile to freeze; then melt from his astonished lips.

The staccato rhythm of high heels echoed against the tiled floor as she walked with sure purpose, slicing through the crowd, dodging other passengers and motorized luggage carts. Passing dozens of gates, she arrived at the Delta counter, handed her ticket to the agent and found a seat in the waiting area.

Christine hated flying. She dreaded the idea that someone else was in control. Impatience that was characteristically hers caused her foot to tap against the metal bar along the base of her chair. One slim leg crossed the other in an effort to stop her frustration from showing. She placed a hand against her shoulder to ease the tension that had worked its way into the muscles when she realized she was being watched from across the terminal.

Dark eyes narrowed as the man noted every detail of the young woman's appearance. His gaze traveled upwards, sliding with smooth caress over wide hips, flat stomach, the firm swell of her breasts and came to rest on the soft curve of her lower lip.

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Squaring her shoulders, Christine met his stare as it locked upon her face. His eyes didn't blink or shift away as he realized he'd been caught watching her. Instead his piercing stare held its gaze for several minutes more.

She felt the warm blush that settled upon the surface of her skin before a passenger moved between their line of vision and the contact was lost. Working to shrug off the effect of the encounter, she checked her watch just as the flight was being called.

The passengers began to board the jet inching their way down the covered tunnel leading into the craft. Christine's eyes swept over the man as he walked ahead of her with easy grace. The muscles of his back rippled though his leather jacket.

Stepping through the curtain into the first class section, she came into direct contact with him. He was big; towering above her, making her height seem diminutive next to his own. His strong lean frame was that of athletic proportions with huge shoulders and broad chest.

He was darkly rugged with a strong, square profile and straight brows over deep set eyes. The bottom half of his face was covered by a beard, making him appear all the more dangerous. The thick material of his sweater stretched tightly across his chest as he raised his arms to store a parcel in the overhead compartment. The air around him was filled with the scent of tangy cologne. He gave her no more than a curt nod before completing his task and easing his long frame into the aisle seat.

Christine swore under her breath and fidgeted with the strap of her bag. "Excuse me." One slender finger indicated the vacant chair by the window. "I believe that is my seat."

The man's gaze met hers. "Of course." His voice was deep and vibrant, wholly masculine. He unfolded his long

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frame and stepped back into the aisle. She brushed by and sank into the upholstered cushions.

The attendants were busy making certain everyone was seated before beginning flight instructions. Christine ignored the well practiced speech. She lifted the blind at the square window and watched the flight crew work. Luggage carts were driven under the wings of several large crafts. Men in orange jackets removed bags and boxes to store them in compartments below.

With a moment's regret she thought of Curtis. She didn't want to leave him so soon after his recent illness. Hopefully she could conclude her business and be home in a few weeks. She promised this would be the last out of town assignment she would take before the holidays.

Finally the engines roared and the first jolt of the plane was felt as it moved onto the runway to await instructions from the tower. The howl of the engines became louder as the craft began to move again. As it picked up speed, Christine's fingers gripped the armrests. She pressed into the thick cushion of her seat and shut her eyes. She felt the tilt of the front wheels lifting off the ground, then the smooth glide of the rear. They were airborne. The muffled voice of the pilot came over the speaker. She held her breath until the craft became level.

"Are you all right?" The man at her side placed a warm hand lightly over hers. "Would you like me to call an attendant?"

She opened her eyes to find him watching her. She relaxed her hold and pressed her hands together in her lap, trying to relieve the cramped muscles her grip had caused.

"I'm fine," she muttered. "I'm afraid I'm not the world's greatest flyer."

"You don't fly often?"

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"If at all possible, I'd rather drive."

The shrug of his heavy shoulders was so slight it was almost undetectable. "If it's any consolation to you, I've made this trip more times than I care to remember. We'll get there in one piece."

Christine could sense an aura about this man; raw power lurking below the surface that he seemed to keep hidden behind a mask of quiet calm. It was evident in the way he moved and spoke. He had strong physical presence, yet his eyes were shrewd and inquisitive, only hinting at the depth of intelligence beneath.

There was a copy of *U.S. News and World Report* sitting in his lap folded to the stock pages. His hand was casually draped across the top. Crisp black hairs curled over the band of a gold wrist watch.

Christine reached for the fold down tray in front of her before pulling her own magazines from her briefcase. They included *Newsweek*, *Entrepreneur* and *Business Today*. A slim hand pushed fallen strands of thick hair behind one ear.

With growing interest, the man watched from below hooded brows as she underlined huge sections of print and wrote several items in the margins of a black leather notebook. When one article was finished, she moved to the next, each time making several more notations.

"I was right," he whispered.

"Pardon?"

"I made a bet with myself. I thought you were a businesswoman. You have that look." At her raised brow, he continued. "You look intelligent, determined, a real no nonsense woman."

"You can see all that?"

"That and perhaps a little more. Most people don't study business journals the way you do unless they work in

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industry. I'd hazard a guess that whatever you do, you excel at it."

Christine boldly extracted the still unread paper under his hand. "I would hazard a guess that most men don't read stock reports unless they have money invested or they are in business themselves."

He shrugged again. "Touché. You also believe in looking something in the eye and calling it by name." He smiled, showing strong white teeth and removed the newspaper from her hand. "Stock reports are a businessman's bible." He pointed to the *Business Today* article. "You're reading about Powers Industry."

Christine glanced at the open magazine on her tray. The last article she read had a huge caption and the name of the firm across the top in bold letters.

Powers Industry was fast becoming a leader in textile commerce within the United States and abroad. It was the brainchild of its founder and current CEO, Douglas Powers and maintained extensive holdings, a large group of financial backers and stockholders. Several years ago, the company had gone public, taking it from a small-based operation to a huge conglomerate, rivaling other corporations of its kind including Burlington and DuPont.

"Are you familiar with it?" she asked.

"I am." Before he could elaborate further a flight attendant came to take their drink orders. When she left, he continued. "Powers is very widely known. Actually, I share some common interests with the firm."

Christine's curiosity was peaked. "I've been studying this company and a few others like it." She closed the cover of her magazine and put it aside.

"You have an interest in textiles?" he asked, tentatively.

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"I have an interest in successful companies and the strategies used by the men who run them."

The attendant arrived with their drinks. Christine watched him add sugar and cream to his coffee, stirring the liquid until it lightened in color.

Over drinks, he spoke of his own business activities. He was returning to New York after a string of meetings in Los Angeles and Atlanta. His large hands made distinctive gestures as he spoke. A Signet ring, which initials she could only glimpse, flashed on the small finger of his left hand.

"I'm rattling on."

"On the contrary," she denied. "I'm finding it very interesting. Please continue."

He smiled. It was a slow, lazy smile that revealed a furrow of laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. "That's enough about me. I want to know about you."

Suddenly the craft jerked and tilted to one side. The cups sitting on the trays in front of them toppled to the floor.

"Oh my, God," Christine breathed. Totally unaware of herself, she gripped his arm. That arm instinctively went around her shoulder and drew her to him. Her fingernails bit through the fabric of his sweater.

"Hold on." His tone was low and soothing in her ear.

The pilot's voice came across the loud speaker. "Sorry folks. We're experiencing a little turbulence. We'll hold steady and rise another few hundred feet. Hopefully we can fly right over this."

The plane tilted further sideways; then began to rock. Christine clamped her mouth closed, feeling her teeth rattle in her head. The lights in the cabin blinked and a woman screamed in the darkness. They felt the plane rise higher. After a few frightful moments the rocking slowed, then subsided. The lights returned and the passengers breathed a collective sigh of relief.

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Slowly, Christine relaxed her grip. "That was an experience I won't soon forget," she moaned.

"You can say that again," he returned, rubbing one palm across his chest where her fingernails had dug into it.

"This is exactly why I don't like to fly," she sputtered. "There's no turbulence on the ground."

The attendants began to check on their passengers and collect the cups and glasses from the floor. Once that was finished, the flight seemed to continue on smoothly. Their drinks were replaced and a light breakfast served.

"You were very supportive and I don't even know your name. I'm Christine Fields."

"Robert Preston," he supplied. "I was happy to be at your service. Besides that 'turbulence thing' I was enjoying the trip." The look he gave her was unmistakable. "Will you be in New York long? I would like to see you again. Perhaps you're free for dinner one evening."

"I'm not sure," she replied. Her hand went to her throat to toy at the pendant on her necklace. "If things don't go according to plan, I won't be staying."

Only then did he see the gold band on her finger. "I understand," he returned. "It's not as if I'm in the habit of asking women I meet on airplanes to go on dates. You would have been my first."

The sight of the New York skyline was still as bold as it was striking even following the horrendous attacks on that city from a foreign nation. Christine had been here on several occasions since then and it never failed to fill her with a sense of sadness and awe. She took a moment to whisper a silent prayer as she gazed at the wide area where the glory of the World Trade Towers once stood.

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Thanks to Robert, she braved the landing much better than she had the departure. They were two of the last people to exit the aircraft and make their way to the baggage claim area. She was almost sorry the flight was over. It had been a long time since she shared a conversation that didn't include a business client or a medical professional.

Baggage claim was crowded and noisy. Luggage was grabbed off conveyor belts. Christine spotted her Gucci bags, one of the few extravagances she'd allowed herself geared towards the excessive travel her job was forcing on her life. She'd tie a pink ribbon around the handle of each piece. It was an old trick her mother had taught her as a little girl when she and her brother had been shipped off every summer to visit their grandparent's farm.

Luggage in hand, Christine searched the area for signs of Robert. She thought she caught a last glimpse of him easing into a taxi. She hurried through the mechanical sliding doors, but the cab was already half way down the road. She hired her own car from the long line of waiting taxies and gave the driver the name of her hotel. She wanted to take time to check her proposal before the meeting. It had been her intention to do that during the flight, but meeting Robert had put an effective end to it. She reached into her purse and pulled out the trip itinerary. Her appointment with Powers Industry was scheduled for one o'clock. She was cutting it close.

When the taxi drew up outside the Hilton, the driver handed her luggage to a red coated bellman who hung the bags on the golden hooks of the luggage cart. "Driver, please wait," she called back over her shoulder, following the bellman into the lobby.

She had enough time to register and have her luggage delivered to her suite. Then she found a powder room, ran a

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comb through her hair, reapplied her make-up and hurried back outside to the waiting taxi.

It was mid August and already the air was brisk. Stoned faced pedestrians scurried up and down the crowded streets. Four lanes of cars and buses were pressed one bumper against the next. Windowed buildings lined the streets stretching to the sky as birds flew overhead, stopping occasionally on ledges to rest in flight.

Men in light overcoats held tightly to their attachés with the day's newspaper still tucked under one arm. This was the city that never sleeps. If anything happened in the world, it happened here first. New York housed the captains of industry, the business moguls and business financiers.

Christine's cab came to a stop outside the Powers Industry Building, a huge skyscraper of metal and mirrored glass, located in the heart of downtown Manhattan. She paid the driver and gathered her collar closer around her neck before stepping out into sharp wind. She lowered her head as she hurried through the revolving doors.

The lobby was a mixture of gray and white marble. She made her way to the reception desk. Two young women sat behind the large structure. The company's name was embossed across the wall behind them in large, silver letters.

"May I help you?"

"I'm Christine Fields. I have an appointment with Douglas Powers."

The woman pressed several buttons on her keypad. "We've been expecting you." She indicated a registry on the desktop. Christine signed the lit computer square and was given an electronic visitor's badge. The woman circled the desk and slid a sensor wand up and down the length of Christine's body and across her purse and briefcase. Then

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she signaled a tall, slender man who led her to the rear of the lobby to a long line of waiting elevators.

She noticed no less than three security guards at various posts throughout the lobby and exits. She also spied several cameras at various locations along the walls. The young man turned a key and the doors closed smoothly before the elevator rose to the twenty-fifth floor.

"Hello, Ms. Fields. I'm Gloria Lindsay, Mr. Powers' personal assistant." A woman greeted Christine as she stepped from the elevator. "I trust you had a pleasant flight."

"Not exactly," Christine supplied. "But I survived it." They walked through tall arches and into a spacious office. It cried wealth and influence.

"I'm sorry to hear you had trouble." As they spoke, Ms. Lindsay led her towards a set of double doors. She opened them and gestured Christine through. "Mr. Powers is waiting for you. You can go right in."

A very distinguished gentleman walked from behind his desk. He was a handsome man despite his years, which were only betrayed by patches of gray at his temples and deep furrows around his eyes and mouth.

"I'm very pleased to finally meet you, Ms. Fields," he began. "Please have a seat." Christine took a chair in front of his desk. "I have a copy of the recommendations you sent, as well as, your credentials." He listed several firms in which Christine had worked in her capacity with the Haney Group. They were all companies in which she'd pulled corporate fat from the provable fire.

Christine had been an efficiency expert and accounts investigator for an Atlanta based team. Her firm was recruited by outside agencies when those companies found their financial bottom line wasn't what it should be. To cure this ill often meant having spoiled executives cut back on fat

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expense accounts or trimming excess out of company programs.

Most often, it meant downsizing personnel. She was in the business of cutting corners and cutting throats. After seven years of working with Haney, she stepped out on faith and started her own firm. In the last eight months, she acquired several contracts and had worked them all to perfection.

Douglas Powers leaned forward across his desk. His fingers were laced together over his blotter. "Allow me to be perfectly frank. I met with my Board of Directors. We have been involved with the launch of our newest division. It's a global inroad into the fashion industry including design, cosmetics and fragrance. The current phase is in the fragrance market. Since early April, we have been suffering a loss. To state it mildly, there is some concern among the Board members, as well as, many of our larger stockholders."

"Hasn't it occurred to your investors that it's sometime necessary to ride out the unexpected risk of a new venture?"

"Although we know that to be true, they become anxious when those risk out weigh the benefits." He quoted a large figure from the last fiscal quarter. "That's too much money to lose in a few months time," he stressed. "Perhaps you can help us make sense of this. If the project continues as it is, we may have no choice but shut it down."

"And yet you haven't. Why?"

"We didn't get where we are today by running scared. The *Bellamour* Campaign should be in a position to make billions. Instead we are investing a small fortune into the campaign and current projections on the other end don't look good."

"What do your own accountants and advisors think?"

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"That's just it. At this point, I don't know who to trust or who to believe. That knowledge pains me no end," he told her. "That's why we've called in someone from the outside."

"I'll do what I can."

"That's all we can ask." Douglas' keen eyes narrowed. "I know you've done your homework."

"Always." She passed him a copy of her proposal and they spent the next two hours discussing the point by point plan.

When they finished, Douglas leaned back in his chair. "You may be just what we need to turn this around. Of course, we are more than willing to compensate you quite well for your efforts." He pulled a contractual agreement from a folder and presented it to her. It was years of training that caused Christine not to gasp in shock at the astronomical sum listed on the form.

"Please understand, my son Nicholas is head of the new division. You would be working closely with him. He was unexpectedly called out of town last week. I've spoken to him and I would like to arrange for you two to meet," he told her. "Will it be possible for you to come tomorrow morning? Shall we say nine o'clock?"

"I think that can be arranged," she agreed.

"Very good. I think this can be an excellent joint venture that will be beneficial for all of us." He pressed a button on his telephone to summon his assistant. "Ms. Lindsay will show you out."

She took a final glance at the agreement Douglas had given her before placing it in her briefcase and followed Ms. Lindsay across the offices back to the waiting elevator. Christine's mind quickly calculated the amount of her commission. It might be a fantastic Christmas holiday after all. She smiled slyly to herself just as the elevator doors whizzed shut

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Northerly wind howled whipping hair into her eyes as she stepped back onto the pavement. She turned only to collide with a tall figure. A cell phone held against his ear dropped and an attaché slipped from his hand, crashing hard against the cement. "Bloody hell," he grimaced, as folders fanned open and loose sheets tumbled out.

She regained her composure in time to stop a page under her heel before it billowed down the street. "I'm so sorry."

The man retrieved his files and shoved them into the case before coming to his feet. "Christine. I certainly wasn't expecting to run into you," Robert smiled. "Fate has drawn us back together." He had changed into a dark suit and necktie. "Where are you headed?"

"I've just completed my business for the day. I'm going back to my hotel." Her eyes narrowed a fraction as her head cocked to one side. Robert was even more handsome in broad daylight. There was something odd. She looked over her shoulder at the Powers Building before she added. "What about you?"

He snapped the latches of his case shut. "I had a bit more to accomplish today, but it can wait. I think I have something better in mind. Have you eaten?"

"Not since breakfast on the plane," she supplied.

"We can hardly classify that as a meal," he returned. "I know a place not far from here. It's not particularly fancy, but the atmosphere is pleasant and the food is good."

"I am hungry," she admitted, honestly.

"Let's go then. What could possibly happen except we spend time getting to know one another?"

"All right," she accepted. "Why not?"

They walked several blocks down the street, stopping outside a Japanese restaurant. Christine looked through the glass windows as he held the door open for her and the

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overhead bell chimed when they entered. The smell of food wafted to her as she pulled off her coat.

"Table for two," the little Japanese girl asked. She slid back the door where there were several low tables and thick colorful mats.

Christine loved Japanese food. They ordered an assortment of rice, Nigiri and Norimaki Sushi, Ramen noodles with BBQ pork and dumplings. Robert had a dish called Nikujaga made with meat and potatoes. They were brought a pot of tea and one of sake as they talked for hours.

Robert made her laugh, smile and cry as he told her one story after another. "You're not going to keep me in suspense any longer," he insisted. "How did everything go today?"

"It went well."

"You got the job?" he asked.

"Probably. If I decide to take it."

His dark brows knitted together. "You mean you came all this way and you're reconsidering?"

Tongue in cheek, she replied. "I have another meeting tomorrow morning. I intend to decide then."

"A second meeting is always promising," he supplied. "What's worrying you?"

"I'd have to work with a man named Nicholas Powers."

Robert played with his fork. "Would that be a problem?"

"It's just a gut feeling I have and I usually follow my instincts. Nicolas is the boss' son. I bet he's the ambitious type. Maybe he has something to prove to his more successful father. That kind of personality can often be ruthless."

Robert whistled softly. "What unworldly sin has opened the gates of hell for him?"

"I probably shouldn't be talking to you about this," she replied, leaning forward across the table in a conspiratorial whisper. "I just have to wonder about a man who would put

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his father's company in a position close to bankruptcy in order to push forward a project that may very well be doomed. Some people don't mind furthering themselves at the expense of others."

The little Japanese girl came to the table with a refill of sake. Christine eased back on her seat cushion. "Forget what I said," she urged. "It was wrong of me and very unprofessional. I haven't even met the man."

"I see." Robert stopped speaking and looked at her again in the same piercing way he had in the airport terminal. "Are you going to make him see the error of his ways?"

"I just might," she insisted.

"Your opinion of this man might change when you meet him."

"You think I should reserve judgment?" Her head tilted to one side. "You're probably right. People aren't always what they seem. I'll keep an open mind." She poured another cup of sake from the pot and offered to refill Robert's cup.

He waved her hand away. "That's all for me. Thanks."

"You've had enough?" she asked, mildly.

"I've had more than enough," Robert supplied. "It's late. I'll see you to your hotel." He dropped several bills on the table and came to his feet.

Outside the restaurant, Robert hailed a taxi. He was lost in his own thoughts, spending most of the drive in silence. Christine stole a glance at him. His hair was brushed back smoothly against a high forehead to curl just at his neckline. When the taxi stopped outside her hotel, she was about to voice her thanks when he pulled her into arms that formed a tight band around her shoulders.

"I can't recall when I've spent such an interesting day with such a charming young woman." His voice was silky. His face was disturbingly close and warm breath fanned her

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cheek. When his lips found hers, she wanted to resist, but found herself raising her hand and resting it lightly against the side of his face. Her fingertips nestled in the hair at his temple; then slid down to rest against his chest.

"I want to see you again. Will that be possible?" He raised a hand and slid one finger across the curve of her cheek.

"I told you I may not be here very long. I could be on a flight south as soon as noon tomorrow."

"That's unacceptable, Christine. I know I will see you again." Robert's tone was certain. "As a matter of fact, I'm going to make sure of it."

The view of the city from the twenty-fifth floor of the Powers Building had always been spectacular. Black fingers of tall buildings stretched to the darkened sky where it gave way to rich sapphire brilliance. From this vantage point, Nicholas could see tiny lights glowing on the angled arms of a jetliner. Its wings were set at a downward tilt in readiness to make its dissent into Kennedy Airport.

The beauty of the early dawn did nothing to lighten his mood. He turned from the scene outside his window to thumb through several stacks of telephone messages and opened the date book on his computer to the morning appointments. There were several listed including a staff meeting with the Launch Team, a briefing with the accountants and a follow-up with Christine Fields.

He lifted the pages of the proposal his father had left for his review. He read the contents several times and stared at it in disgust almost hating the knowledge that it was good. There was no mistaking the fact that this woman knew what she was doing. The main focus was well defined, each concept clear and the final hypothesis sound.

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To say the least, this campaign meant a lot to him. *Bellamour* was being built on his vision. The project was already entering into the next phase. Information about the existence of the operation had reached the media through the company's Public Relations Department, but their financial issues hadn't been leaked and they intended to keep it that way.

Nicholas swallowed the last drops of cold coffee, tasting the bitter dregs at the bottom of the cup. The tang of it wasn't the only thing that left a bad taste in his mouth. He didn't like games, especially when it came to business. There was too much to accomplish and someone was working overtime to see to it that everything went up in smoke.

His mouth set in a grim line as he stood and thrust both hands into the pockets of his trousers. He moved back to the window, gazing across Manhattan sound. He was looking forward to his meeting with Ms. Fields. There would certainly be a lot for them to discuss.

Christine allowed her eyes to grow accustomed to the light in the room. She rolled onto her side and watched the morning dawn stretch across the city in crystal shades of red and gold. She reached for a glass of juice on the bedside table. The ice had long ago melted and she took a tentative sip of the sour liquid. She battled with the idea of calling the airline and changing her flight to the next available craft headed south.

She was angry and didn't know how long she planned to keep that anger at bay. The evening before, she combed through the remaining magazine articles still unread and found several which discussed the impending *Bellamour* Campaign.

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She put her glass on the table and dialed the telephone number for Delta Airlines. Before the operator could come across the line, she changed her mind and called room service instead.

At precisely nine o'clock she arrived at the Powers Building, went through the security checks and met Gloria Lindsay on the executive floor before following the same steps back into Douglas' office.

"Ms. Fields. It's good to see you again. Please have a seat. We are just waiting on Nicholas. Can we get you anything? Coffee? Tea?"

"No. Thank you. I'm fine."

Douglas nodded his head. "That will be all for now, Gloria."

She smiled at Christine and walked towards the door. "Good morning, Mr. Powers," she heard the woman say behind her. "Welcome back."

Christine came to her feet and turned to face the man behind her. "Nicholas. This is Christine Fields," Douglas announced. "She is the operative we discussed."

Nicholas Powers strode into the office with the smooth glide of a tiger. His eyes locked on hers, pinning her in place. "Hello, Ms. Fields."

The voice was wholly familiar. It was the same voice that had soothed her frazzled nerves on a rocky airplane flight, whispered softly against her hair and told her stories over a Japanese dinner. Now clean shaven, he exposed a cleft in his square chin that had been hidden from view beneath his beard.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Powers. Your father has told me about your plans for the new division." She took his outstretched hand. The grip of his fingers tightened against hers, almost causing her to wince.

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"Please sit," Douglas instructed, indicating the chairs in front of him. He spoke to his son. "I trust you found time after your return to read the proposal I left."

"Another matter detained me," Nicholas replied. His eyes didn't leave Christine's face. He expected to see a moment's shock, but found none. Anger began to boil in his chest. "I did manage to look them over early this morning. I read the proposal and I have several questions to discuss. I have an outline of key topics to cover."

Christine smiled. "I'm here to do anything in my capacity to assist you, Mr. Powers. I feel sure I can get to the bottom of your problems."

Nicholas' nerves grated at the way she said his name and one fist tightened on the arm of his chair. He turned to his father. "I'd like a moment to discuss these items with Ms. Fields," he announced.

"I'm in complete agreement," Douglas returned. "I'll leave you to it. We need both of you on board with this in order to make it work."

Christine was pleating her skirt with her fingers. "I'd be more than happy to answer any questions you might have." Two sets of dark eyes watched her, one with keen interest, the other mildly complacent.

"Shall we?" Nicholas came to his feet to guide Christine out of his father's office and towards his own. His grip on her elbow was tight. She thought of snatching her arm free, but was certain she would attract unwanted attention.

Nicholas' office was just as large as his father's, but it was more comfortably furnished. There was a brown leather sofa and several bookshelves. The room was a pleasant mixture of comfort and masculinity.

He shut the door and leaned against it, two strong arms folded across his chest. "Brava. You played that little scene

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surprisingly well. My compliments." The extent of his anger was almost tangible. "As for your Emmy Award winning performance yesterday, today's act was child's play."

"I could say the same about you, *Mr. Powers*," she hissed. "Did you think I didn't know who you were?"

"I wasn't sure what you knew and I didn't plan on taking any chances." He moved to stand dangerously close, causing her to crane her neck to maintain eye contact. "Think about it from my point of view," he began. "We met on an airplane headed for New York. I watched while you poured yourself into articles dealing with my company knowing that we are having financial difficulties with the project."

Christine's eyes narrowed. "Who did you think I was?"

"I had no idea. That's why I started picking your brain to find out what you were after."

"You told me your name was Robert Preston."

"It is. My full given name is Nicholas Robert Preston Powers. Tell me something. When did you realize who I was?" he asked. "Did you know on the plane or later at the restaurant?"

"It wasn't from the very beginning," she confessed. "As a matter of fact, I didn't realize it until we met outside this building."

"Very good," he exclaimed. An angry frown marred his smooth brow. "What gave me away?"

She didn't want to say it was the striking good looks he shared with his father or the similarity in the way their eyes wrinkled at the corners when they smiled. She said instead. "I'm nobody's fool. I'll admit the beard threw me at first."

"So you thought it would be a good idea to continue to mislead the situation?"

"I was taking my cues from you," she insisted. "Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

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"I thought about it, but I changed my mind soon enough. I couldn't very well tell you my identity after you stated your glowing opinion of me, now could I?" he scoffed.

"I certainly wasn't wrong."

"Weren't you? You found no trouble baiting me or flirting shamelessly."

Christine's eyes rolled heavenward. "I admit to baiting you, but flirting. I don't think so."

Nicholas ignored her comment and continued on. "It wouldn't have been the first time a woman shamelessly threw herself at me and I've always been more than willing to accept a challenge. Consider all the sake you drank and the fact that we just met and you let me kiss you."

"I wasn't the least bit drunk," she established. "For your information, I can drink most men under the table and still walk a straight line while reciting the Declaration of Independence backwards. I just wanted to see how far you planned to go."

His gaze trailed the full length of her body. "Had it been under other circumstances, there is no telling how far I would have gone," he returned.

Christine's hand itched to slap him across the cheek, but she managed to suppress the urge.

"Did you think I didn't notice the ring on your finger?" he asked, quietly. "It's very strange that I didn't see it there later or does it come off and on to suit you?"

At that her temper hit the surface. "No one talks to me that way," she hissed. "Just who the hell do you think you are? There is no way I'll work for you, Nicholas Powers, Robert Preston or whoever you are." She tried to push by, but his large body blocked the doorway.

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He stared down at her. "That's just as well *Mrs.* Fields since I'm not sure I'm in agreement with the way you do business."

"I could say the same thing about you so let me pass."

"Not yet," he insisted. "There's something I want from you."

Christine sputtered. "There's nothing I intend to give."

"Let's explore our options anyway, shall we," he continued. "I believe your proposal is a good one. I'm willing to pay for its use and have someone on my staff carry it out."

Christine's eyes blazed. "Not a chance."

Nicholas walked to his desk and lifted his copy of the proposal. "Powers Industry would be willing to pay well for the right to use it."

Her gaze met his. "Not a chance," she repeated. "That's my work and we come as a package. I'm not in the habit of dividing the two. No deal."

The temper he'd been working to hold in check started to boil again. He needed something drastic to happen and on one hand, what this woman had to offer could help his company even though he didn't like her style and ultimately wondered if she could be trusted.

After the briefing he'd had that morning with his Launch Team, his first thoughts of shrugging this woman off had begun to change. Things weren't going well. The project had to come first. Too much money and thousands of man hours had been invested.

"Package deal," he moaned. "Despite what happened between us, my father is quite right. The bottom line is your proposal and your ideas are good and we need your services. If we give this a try, I'd need to know that you can be every bit as efficient as your qualifications say you are."

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Christine shook her head. "I don't think this will work. We got off on the wrong foot. Why would you even want to go forward?"

He answered her with a certain coldness he couldn't keep from his voice. "Because time is of the essence and you have already wasted enough of mine."

Her determination was just as strong. "Drop dead."

His sudden laughter filled the room. "All in good time, I imagine," he replied. "All in good time."

"I was right about you. You are ruthless."

"I'm very glad I didn't disappoint you. Would you care to see just how ruthless I can be?" Nicholas' eyes held a look she couldn't discern. "Listen. We don't have the luxury of starting over from scratch looking for another operative."

A note of contempt clouded her tone. "That's not very subtle."

"It wasn't meant to be since it was never one of my strong suits. I seldom have time for it. I believe we are both after the same thing, perhaps for two different reasons. I have a project to launch and an ego which won't allow me to admit defeat even if it stares me in the face. You have a new business that could not only use the exposure, but the financial insertion as well."

Christine sank into the chair opposite him. Apparently, he'd done his homework too. He was right and she hated it. She did need this. She had too many responsibilities including those to her family and her agency.

"About yesterday," she began. "There's something I need to explain."

"I'd prefer to forget about it," he quipped. "I never mix business with pleasure."

She swallowed the angry retort that formed on her lips as she remembered the figure Douglas had given her. She also

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had to consider the fact that this was a high profile case. If she completed it successfully, there would be many other clients of this caliber and her business would benefit from it.

"Are you willing to give this a try?" he asked.

"I'll do it under one condition. I'm here to find out what's happening to your project. You have to agree to give me free reign to operate. That's the only way I can do my job."

Nicholas looked into her eyes. "Deal." He reached out to shake her hand. "We need to discuss what I expect from you. First of all, Powers requires absolute confidentiality. We are a top competitor in the industry. There is a confidentiality clause in your contract," he stressed. "This has to be strictly adhered to."

"That won't be a problem."

"Good," he returned. "When we're finished here I'll have Gloria take you to our Human Resource department and they will get the ball rolling on their end. Your official title will be Executive Launch Assistant. You will basically be working under cover. We don't want anyone to know your true purpose."

"You move fast, don't you?"

"With the problems we have been facing with some key phases of the project, we are behind schedule. Have you ever heard of Dr. Kyle Dupree?"

"I don't believe so," she replied. "Who is he?"

"He's a well known chemist. For several years, he worked as an independent designer at an agency in North Carolina developing a cosmetic line. He could have sold his formulas to other companies in the industry. Instead, Dupree works for us. He completed the cosmetics line during phase one and has started development on our fragrance division. The man is a genius and we were honored he decided to join

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our team," Nicholas told her. "I will have several additional things to brief you on before we leave."

Christine had dollar figures ringing in her ears at the sound of what was quite obviously a very expensive undertaking. "Leave. Did you say leave? Where are *we* going?"

"In exactly one week, I will be leaving for Paris, France, the leading nation in the perfume industry to meet with Dr. Dupree. You will accompany me," replied Nicholas, smoothly.

"Wait a minute," Christine choked. "You expect me to jump on a plane and whisk off to Paris with you just like that?" She snapped her fingers.

"That's correct. You do have a valid passport, I hope. Do we need to quickly arrange for one?" He reached for the telephone.

"Is there ever a dull moment with you?"

"I certainly hope not." His sly smile showed the creases around his eyes. "The fact that you speak fluent French will be an asset." He saw the hesitation in her eyes. "It's entirely up to you unless I pegged you wrong."

Her chin jutted forward indignantly. "Absolutely not."

"Well then."

"I'll be ready to leave for France at the end of the week."

The morning they were scheduled to travel proved to be a dull, hazy day with a light whisper of drizzle. She had met with Nicholas on multiple occasions since that initial meeting and together they had several very long conferences. The rest of her days were spent studying project reports, budget figures and starting preliminary paperwork. There was no getting out of the assignment now so she decided to jump in with both feet. The contract agreement was signed

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and her copy had been forwarded to her Atlanta office by express mail.

She finished getting ready for the trip, applying the final touches to her make-up and hair; then she contacted the front desk to have her luggage collected and followed the bellhop out the door. She paid the hotel bill with her company credit card and waited near the entrance to the lobby doors.

A long white limousine caught her eye when a tall driver dressed in a dark grey uniform and cap came from the car and entered the lobby. He walked towards Christine. "Are you Ms. Fields?"

She nodded. "I am."

"I'm here to take you to the airport," he informed her. "Is this your luggage, Miss?"

Christine shook her head again and stepped aside to let him get her bags. She followed him through the entrance to the waiting vehicle. The driver opened the rear door and she eased into the seat, facing the other occupant.

Nicholas was looking extremely handsome in dark trousers, burgundy sweater and tweed overcoat. "Good morning, Christine."

"Morning," she returned, tentatively.

The car pulled away from the curb. The streets were already crowded. Traffic was becoming heavy as drivers began making their way to work during the early morning hours. The only sound coming from inside the car was the classical opera Nicholas was playing and the quiet swish of windshield wipers.

"I hope you're not nervous about the trip today," he stated.

She knew he was referring to their flight from Atlanta. The truth of the matter was she was almost scared to death at the thought of flying over water. She purchased several

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bottles of Dramamine and hoped the pills would settle her nerves.

"I would have thought in your line of work, air travel was a requirement."

"I've always managed to work around it. I'm sure I'll be fine," she said, patting her drug filled purse. "I wasn't going to let anything stop me. Seeing Paris has always been a dream of mine. That's why I studied the language." She couldn't keep the note of excitement from her voice.

"It's a beautiful city. You'll fall in love with it."

She smiled. "I'm looking forward to it."

"You have a nice smile. It's too bad that temper of yours prevents you from using it more often." Her smile faded with his offhand remark and he immediately regretted the words. "I'm sorry. That started off as a compliment."

"Go figure," she jeered.

They approached the highway exit towards Kennedy Airport and circled the roads leading to the terminals. The driver continued beyond the main entrances for Delta, Southwest and U.S. Air until they came to a private strip. The limousine stopped near a jet standing in the air field.

Christine preceded Nicholas up the metal stairs and into the craft. There was a deep blue sofa and eight chairs that could swivel or recline into any type of comfortable position. The carpeting was a pale mixture of earth tones. Curved walls were covered with silky paper. Lights trailed down the center top and other lamps were mounted to tables located near the bar and sitting area. To the back of the plane was the kitchen and lavatory. In another section beyond that were bedrooms.

"How do you like it?" Nicholas asked. "It was just finished. This is part of the reason I was flying commercial last week."

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"It's beautiful," she said, easing into one of the swivel chairs. The fabric was supple and soft and she sank comfortably into it.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "We're fully stocked."

"I could manage some fruit juice and a piece of toast," she admitted, not willing to chance anything too heavy just before take off.

Nicholas returned from the kitchen with two slices of toast, a glass of grapefruit juice for her and a beaker of coffee for himself.

"Thank you," she murmured, taking the glass. She searched for the bottle in her purse and shook two pills into her palm. Christine thought again about the flight from Atlanta and quickly swallowed one more.

When she looked up, she found Nicholas watching her. For a moment she felt as if he'd been reading her mind, probing to her soul. "What's that?"

"Something to calm my nerves just in case." She finished the juice and sank further into the plush chair. Almost immediately she could feel the effects from the tablets.

"It's time to get ready for take off."

Nicholas was cool and confident as if he had done this a million times before. What would have happened differently if they'd met for the first time in Douglas' office?

She had just enough strength to latch her seatbelt across her lap before the pills claimed her.

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*You've just finished reading the first chapter of Alyce Holmes' Power that Binds. If you want to know more about Nicholas and Christine, please purchase your choice of a Paperback or CD on our website. Thanks for becoming an Alyce Holmes fan.*

