



MY *Cruel*
BILLIONAIRE

LAURA OLSEN

My Cruel Billionaire

Laura Olsen

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and explicit scenes, and is intended for mature audiences.

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Chapter One

Jenna

“Would you like another glass of merlot?”

I glanced up from my phone, a smile finding its way to my face. I met the waitress’s gaze as she hovered nearby. Viviani’s proved busy that night, every table taken and a line of people waiting to be seated going out the door.

It’s no wonder that the place was so popular. Not only was it one of the most elegant, most lovely eateries in town, the head chef was world-renowned as a culinary expert.

The waitress was waiting for my answer. I made an effort not to look out the picture glass window, which displayed a magnificent view of the city skyline. Instead I focused on the waitress, so as not to be rude.

“No thank you,” I said, glancing at my wine glass and finding it empty. Again. “I don’t want to get plastered before my date even gets here.”

Somewhere out of sight I heard a string quartet playing. I think they were on the opposite side of the raised gazebo-like structure that occupied the middle of the restaurant lobby floor. I think it was a concerto by Vivaldi they were playing, but I was always more of a Grateful Dead kind of music fan.

She nodded, but a worried frown etched its way onto her pinched face.

“He’s twenty minutes late at this point, isn’t he?”

“Twenty?” I blew air out of my lips in a razz, my face turning into a glower. “More like thirty at this point.”

“Is that why you’re on your phone?” she asked, pointing at the device on the tablecloth. “I noticed you’ve been looking at it constantly.”

“No, I’m dealing with work stuff,” I said, flipping the phone over so the screen didn’t show. I worked for Evan Jones, one of the richest men in the world. The things that are discussed via text can move mountains, figuratively if not literally, and I didn’t want the screen visible while she was standing so close.

Not that I believed she was going to turn into a corporate spy or anything. But these days you have to be careful. If the waitress had gone on social media and blabbed about something she saw on my phone, stock prices could take a hit.

I had to be responsible. Also, I will confess, I was being a bit of a workaholic. It just seems like there’s always something going on with work and I couldn’t take even a brief moment of respite for myself.

“Well, I applaud your hustle, working while your deadbeat date makes you wait.”

I laughed softly, feeling her comment down in my bones.

“Men, am I right?” I said.

She laughed, because really, that’s all you have to say to another woman.

“Yes, you’re right. Let me know if you change your mind about that merlot.”

“Will do.”

She fluttered off to deal with other guests, and I flipped my phone back open. It was kind of odd that my date, Joe, hadn't shown up yet. It was even odder, not to mention rude, that he had made no attempt to contact me whatsoever. I knew he was busy, hell I was busy too.

I think that date was the first time I'd been out and about for months.

I tried to ignore my mounting anxiety and concentrated on answering work emails. I must have gotten a couple hundred of them every day, and most of them were important. As in millions of dollars important.

First date jitters aside, I was glad to be out on the town, in a nice place with nice music and nice ambience.

My table was scaped to perfection, with a dark red cloth laden with decorative flourishes. The crystal vase with an exotic purple blossom in the center was only the start. The napkin rings, made of the purest silver, featured an engraving of a waterfront scene complete with an old-timey ship with more sails than you could shake a stick at. I pictured some craftsman meticulously putting in all of the details on that napkin ring and it made me tired just thinking about it.

I glanced around the restaurant, looking for something to take my mind off of the empty chair across from me. A couple nearby appeared to be on an anniversary date. They were a bit older than me, but the looks in their eyes made them seem young. I guessed that love was the magical ingredient in their fountain of youth.

Me, I just wanted my date to actually show up this time.

Because I was bored, and getting eyestrain from looking at all of those emails, I kept looking around the restaurant. My eyes naturally gravitated toward the VIP section, the gazebo-like structure in the center of the restaurant floor. The lattice work gave a sort of anonymity to the denizen occupying it. I could see a man inside. I couldn't see his face, but I could see by the cut of his suit everything he had was custom-made. His haircut was impeccable, worn in a short style.

I saw the red flash of light on his face for a brief moment as he lit his cigar. That really threw me for a loop. Nobody was supposed to smoke indoors in the city, it's a law. I wondered how that guy got away with it. My first thought was he was probably a dangerous mobster or something and nobody wanted to mess with him.

A body interposed itself between me and the VIP section. I blinked, then looked up past a red power tie to see the smiling face of a handsome, young man.

"Hello there," he said. "You're even better looking in person."

"Thank you," I said on reflex, though it was kind of a stilted compliment. Without preamble, he settled into the seat opposite of me. I waited to see if he would offer an explanation or apology for his tardiness. He did not.

I found him attractive enough, with a heart-shaped face and sensuous lips. His eyes were friendly, and yet sort of closed off. Like he was there, but his mind was somewhere else entirely.

“So,” he said, eyeing the menu. “Have you ordered yet?”

“I have not. I was waiting for you.”

Again I paused, waiting to see if he would apologize, but he just nodded as if nothing was awry and continued to scan the menu.

“So,” he said, looking up briefly at me. “Do you come here often?”

“No, I can’t say that I do.”

He cocked his eyebrow.

“Oh, right, you’re a secretary or something like that.” His dismissiveness didn’t annoy me as much as it probably should have. I really was just glad to be out of the house, dating like a ‘normal’ person. “I guess you can’t afford a place like this.”

“I’m a personal assistant, actually,” I said, a bit dryly, but he didn’t pick up on it.

“Oh. Pretty much same difference. I’m kind of a big deal on the business scene in this city.”

I smiled, and tried not to laugh. Is there anyone who has ever uttered the words ‘I’m kind of a big deal’ who actually was, in fact, a big deal? If he had really been a big deal I would have met him some other way than a dating app on my phone. I regularly worked with the major players in the city, and he was not one of them.

He continued to talk at me in a manner that suggested he was trying to impress me with what a big shot he was. He kept

going on and on about his career, his connections in high places, and so forth.

Joe wasn't being a jerk about it, nor was he being overtly over the top. Still, it was kind of off-putting. I decided to roll with it. At least he was nice to look at, even if he was kind of a bore.

"Oh," he said, putting down his wine glass. "And I even worked a deal with Evan Jones. THE Evan Jones."

I couldn't keep a smile from coming to my face. Evan Jones was my boss.

"Not just any Evan Jones," I said playfully. "But THE Evan Jones."

He totally missed the context and nodded enthusiastically.

"Yeah, I closed a deal with him on the Sikorsky Aeronautics firm. That was worth half a billion dollars all on its own."

I couldn't stop a smirk from coming to my lips. He had been nowhere near that deal. I had worked on that deal with Evan, and I knew all of the players involved. And it was worth two hundred and fifty million. A substantial sum, but far from half a billion dollars.

I was disappointed in Joe. I didn't let it show, though, because quite frankly his lies were so entertaining. He kept name-dropping people he clearly didn't know, and talking about deals he had never been a part of.

Still, dinner was nice. I had lamb stew with an arugula salad. The stew had been spiced perfectly, and went well with the house red wine my date ordered. Another sign he wasn't the big shot he claimed to be.

I was having enough diversion that I didn't notice that the restaurant was shutting down all around us until they started bussing a table nearby. It was down to us and Mr. Cigar Smoking Big Shot in the VIP area.

"Would you like some more wine?" Joe arched his brows at me from across the table. Judging from his manners, I would say that he probably thought he had done a lot better job of impressing me than he actually had achieved.

"Oh no, I'm fine," I said. "Besides, we're being rude. These nice people would like to finish closing the restaurant and go home, I'm sure."

"Hey, they're in the service industry. They should be used to the idea of serving their betters."

Yeah, he was getting less and less sexy by the moment. Not that he had ever been all that to begin with. He was handsome, but lacked, ah, heat as I would like to put it. I felt zero chemistry with the guy.

"In that case," he said. "I guess we should ask for the bill?"

The emphasis he put on 'we' made it clear we were splitting the check. I didn't get upset about it. It wasn't like I couldn't afford it. I was glad I'd kept a moderate pace on the merlot, though.

We split the bill, and I rose from the table. He rose with me, his mannerisms seeming a bit more anxious now.

"So," he said as I gathered up my purse. "Your place, or mine?"

I cocked an eyebrow at him and gave him a half smile.

“I’m sorry, I have a ton of work to do tomorrow, and a really early start. I’m going to have to call it a night. Thanks for joining me for dinner, though.”

Disappointment flashed in his eyes and etched a frown on his face. I decided to get while the getting was good.

“Good night, Joe.”

I turned to leave, and all of the sudden his hand darted out. His fingers closed around my bicep, almost painfully.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” he snapped.

It turned back to face him, my smile fading.

“I’m going home, as I just explained, I have an early start tomorrow.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” he sputtered. “I wasted a lot of my valuable time on you, not to mention my money.”

“We split the bill, Joe.”

“I’d have never agreed to meet you here if I thought you were going to give me the big brush off,” he snarled. “Now, you’re coming home with me and you’re going to give us both a happy ending to this date.”

The waitress from before came to try and rescue me. She stepped up in front of us and scowled.

“Ma’am, is this man causing you problems?” she asked.

I opened my mouth to say I could handle it, not wanting her to get caught in the crossfire.

“Shut your hole,” Joe growled. “This isn’t any of your business.”

“Joe, for fuck’s sake,” I said. “Leave her alone.”

“I’m going to call the police,” the waitress said. “Unless you let her go and leave right this moment.”

Joe squeezed my arm a little bit tighter, then leaned toward the waitress.

“You go ahead and call the police. I’m a big deal in this city. I own the fucking police.”

“Let’s put that theory to the test,” the waitress said, reaching into her apron and pulling out a cellphone.

“That won’t be necessary.”

A deep voice, more confident than God spoke from behind me. I tried to turn and face the speaker, but Joe kept a firm grip on my arm.

“This gentleman is going to leave on his own,” the voice repeated. It sounded strangely familiar, and my mind reeled as it tried to place the sound.

“Of course, sir,” the waitress said.

I put two and two together. The man behind my back must have been the VIP guest. Mr. Cigar. Obviously he was in charge, maybe the owner of the place. That was probably why he got away with smoking indoors.

Joe looked behind me at the speaker.

“Hey, get lost pal. This is none of your damn business.”

“It is in your vested interest to remember who you are speaking to, Joseph.”

Joe's face paled about seven shades. He released me instantly and started fawning over the VIP.

"I'm so sorry, sir," Joe said, actually bowing his head as he backed away. "I didn't recognize you at first. Please forgive me."

Then, I guess to prove he was still somewhat in charge, Joe looked over at me and smiled.

"I'll talk to you later, Jenna."

"No you won't. I'm blocking your number."

I turned around to thank the VIP, my savior, the cigar-smoking man. Only when I saw his face, my voice died in my throat.

I knew this man. Very, very well.

Chapter Two

Jenna

Staring Michael Wallace in the eyes sent my mind back five years into the past. I never thought I'd stare into those eyes ever again. I still remembered the last time we'd faced each other...

Before I started working for Evan Jones, I was a personal assistant for Michael. The beginning of the end started at a board meeting for his company. What really stands out in my memory is the texture of the glossy cherry wood meeting table.

They say that scent is the strongest sense that's tied to memory. Well, I can remember the smell of Pointwoods manager Ted Blonsky's cheap cologne just fine. It was like he'd bathed in it. Ted sat to my right, and my eyes were burning from his 'showered in stink pretty' stench.

So, I focused on the table. The individual grains and the swirling knots lurking beneath a sea of epoxy. It helped me ignore the droning of "Methuselah" Maurice Prentiss, the manager of a hedge fund that Michael owned. Maurice sure liked the sound of his own voice, and when he had a captive audience like the boardroom, he could go on forever.

"Okay, Maurice," Michael said at length. About ten minutes too late for my estimation. "Thanks so much for that... detailed... verbal essay about why the fund you manage is

hemorrhaging money. Pack up your things and pick up your severance check from HR. You're fired."

Maurice flinched, and then looked fearfully at Michael.

"Fired? Just because I had a couple of bad months?"

"You've had fourteen bad months, Maurice," Michael said. His eyes could blaze with fury, or they could be cold as ice. He somehow split the difference with Maurice. "Time and time again I've given you a chance to turn things around and every time it bites me in the ass. I'm done with you. You're done here."

"But... but my reports," Maurice stammered. He looked at me like I was going to help him, but I turned my gaze away. Michael could be indiscriminate whenever he was slinging his anger around and it was easy to get caught in the crossfire. "I told you good reasons for why I was struggling to show a profit. Logical reasons."

"Maurice, what's the difference between a reason and an excuse, again?" Michael's terse voice sounded unnaturally loud. The silence that followed his outburst was louder still. "Well?"

"I... you always say there isn't—"

"There is no difference between a reason and an excuse. I focus on results. And seeing as you're not getting me the results you promised you would when you campaigned for your current... excuse me, for your FORMER position on this board, I'm showing you the door."

"Mr. Wallace... Michael, come on. You came to my son's birthday party."

“Yes, I remember. I gifted your son a new tricycle. I’m sorry I couldn’t gift his father with competence.”

Maurice stood there in stunned silence for a long moment. I felt bad for him, but not too bad. Quite frankly I had expected Michael to give him the ax a long time ago.

“But Michael—”

“Nobody in this room calls me Michael. I let you get away with it at your son’s party, and that was a one-time occurrence.”

“Mr. Wallace—”

“Shut up. Get out.”

Michael’s tone brooked no argument. Maurice gathered up his papers—I don’t know why he bothered since he was being fired—and sulked his way out of the meeting.

“Don’t you think you were a little harsh, Mr. Wallace?” Ted asked.

“A little harsh?” Michael snorted derisively. “Please. If I wanted to be a little harsh, I’d call you out for the fact that Pointwoods stock has dropped like a safe thrown off the Empire State Building.”

Ted closed his mouth, but Michael was not done.

“If I wanted to be a little bit harsh, I would send you to the unemployment line along with Maurice. If I wanted to be a little bit harsh, I’d do a lot of things.”

“Mr. Wallace, please,” said Phil Rogers, manager of... you know, I don’t even remember what company Rogers

managed. “You’re upsetting everyone and disrupting this meeting.”

“Upsetting everyone?” Michael blinked. “Oh, I had no idea. I’m sorry, Phillip.”

Phillip looked cautiously optimistic.

“You are?”

I was frankly flabbergasted as well. I’d never, ever, EVER heard Michael apologize for anything.

“Yes,” Michael said in a soft, pleasant voice. “I’m sorry that I’ve been so lax with you that you think you can call me out at MY meeting in MY building about MY companies.”

Phillip closed his mouth and tried to look small.

“Let’s be perfectly clear,” Michael snapped, gathering us all in with his gaze. “We’re here to make money. Period. I’m here to make sure that all of you are doing just that. Period. I’m not here to make you feel better about yourselves, or to hold hands and sing kumbaya. I’m your boss, not a preschool teacher. You want validation? Do your fucking jobs and do them well. I validate with money.”

He gestured at Darla Crane, the manager of a tech startup Michael had recently acquired.

“Just ask Darla. She got her stock shares up consistently over the last six months, and I just gave her a six-figure bonus on top of her already generous salary. Be like Darla, Phillip. Know your role and shut your mouth until you have something relevant to say.”

“Yes, sir,” Phillip said, shrinking even more into himself. I felt really bad for him.

On the other hand, when Michael was being forceful and dominant, it kind of turned me on. At that point, we’d been having an affair for months. We never talked about it, but it felt like it was going somewhere.

The longer the meeting went, the more antsy I got. That was because I had some massive news for Michael. Something that would bring us even closer together.

But I knew Michael and how he conducted himself and his business. I knew he wouldn’t be receptive to what I had to say until after all the work stuff for the day was over. I really wanted him to listen to what I had to say with no distractions.

But if I’m being honest with myself, I was excited for another reason altogether. You see, Michael and I had a kind of ritual that took place after his meetings. He would get himself all angry and worked up, yelling and sometimes throwing things around (though thankfully never at any people. For all of his bluster he wasn’t a violent man).

Then, after the meeting was over, he would look over at me and say “Jenna, I need you to hang out for a bit. There are some things we need to take care of.”

That was his way of saying he was going to ravish me right there on the meeting room table. It helped calm his nerves after the meetings. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to complain. Michael was a good deal older than me, and, well, he knew things that made me think he was a sex wizard.

As the last manager slunk out of the meeting with their tail tucked firmly between their legs, Michael glanced over at me.

“Jenna, thank you for hanging out for a bit longer. There’s something I need to go over with you.”

“Of course, Mr. Wallace,” I said sweetly. But not too sweetly. Our affair was a secret as far as I knew... but I was sure that after I told him my big news, it probably wouldn’t be a secret any longer.

The door to the room closed with a firm click, and he stalked over to where I sat in my chair. Standing behind me, his hands smoothed my hair. His soft palm caressed my cheek. A gasp and a shiver went through me. My heart started beating faster. I turned my face into his palm and kissed it. I couldn’t help myself.

I suckled on his fingers while his other hand busied itself with undoing my blouse. Every button that came undone increased my excitement that much more. As the fabric split in a V, it revealed the lace demi cup bra I wore underneath.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, clearly intrigued. His hand caressed my semi-exposed breast, palm stroking the nipple. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back. His touch felt amazing.

“You bought this for me, along with the matching G-string.”

“Oh right. I have good taste.”

I chuckled, but it soon turned into a moan as he dropped his mouth onto my neck. His lips and tongue teased the sensitive flesh there. I felt his teeth bite down for just a moment as his fingers pinched my exposed nipples.

I cried out, not from pain but from pleasure. It felt good to have him touching me like that. Taking control of me and my body and using that control to make me feel oh so very good. Like I said, the man knew what he was doing in the bedroom. Or the boardroom, as the case may be, which I guess is a double entendre if you're into that sort of thing.

“Your little pink nipples are getting hard, Jenna,” he said in his velvety soft voice, deep as the ocean. “Why is that?”

“Because... oooh,” I gasped. “Because it feels so good when you touch me.”

He buried his nose in my hair and inhaled deeply. I could feel his need, his desire for me growing by the second. Not literally, as his cock was separated from me by the back of the chair, but I knew him pretty well at that point.

At least I thought I did.

“I could just eat you up,” he growled. His lips kissed my neck, then he nibbled on my earlobe. Meanwhile, his left hand diverted down and passed under the waistband of my skirt. I moaned, arching my back to rear against his touch as he stroked my pussy through the lacy panties.

“You're so wet,” he said. “You have the best pussy in the world.”

I cried out sharply as a hard twinge ran through my clitoris. I loved it when he said things like that to me. I knew that I was far, far from his first love. I had hopes of being the last, though.

He came from around the back of my chair, his hand still under my skirt. Michael shoved my chair back and it rolled

across the floor. His hand came out of my panties, and he lifted his fingers to his nose and inhaled deeply.

His pupils dilated, nostrils flaring like a mad bull as he reached down and grabbed me by the biceps. Michael dragged me out of the chair and spun me around, so my butt rested against the edge of the table.

Michael pulled my blouse down. I assisted him, helping to disrobe myself. He stared in wild wonder at the way my breasts were pushed up and exposed by the demi cup bra. Then he buried his face between my breasts.

A shuddering moan escaped my throat as he kissed his way down my belly. I fumbled with the zipper behind my back and undid it just as he started pulling the skirt down. It slid down over my stocking-clad legs to puddle on the floor around my ankles.

I stepped out of it just in time for him to push me firmly back onto the table. He started to take off my panties as well.

“There’s a snap crotch,” I said between heavy pants. I liked the idea of him making love to me in the sexy underwear he’d purchased for me. It made me feel desired and treasured.

He undid the snap, and then stared at my exposed pussy, biting his lower lip as a low growl emanated from his barrel chest.

I gasped as he thrust two fingers inside of me.

“You’re warm and slippery for me, Jenna,” he growled. “Just the way I like it.”

He undid his fly and fished out his rod. I spread my legs and leaned back on my elbows. The projector, still on because no

one had wanted to risk his wrath by lingering long enough to turn it off, cast both of our shadows onto the silk screen at the end of the room.

Michael pushed the head of his throbbing member between my wide-open outer lips. A sharp cry split the air as he glided inside of me, opening me up and filling me. It took me a moment to realize the cry had been my own voice.

I threw my arms up over my head as he had his way with me. My eyes squeezed shut as my pussy convulsed hard, as if trying to draw him deeper inside of me. Michael thrust like an expert, modifying his speed and depth depending on my reactions. He knew my body so very well, and I loved every minute of it.

I reared up as he climaxed inside of me, his cock throbbing like a vibrator. Fireworks splashed a dazzling display on the back of my eyelids as I came hard. Michael, mindful of the noise for some reason even though the door was quite thick, clapped a hand over my mouth as I screamed out my orgasm. I screamed again and again into his hand, twisting and writhing like a landed fish as my body was locked in the throes of ecstasy.

He finished, and then stepped away and stowed his cock back in his trousers. Michael and I usually cuddled a little after the sex. The cuddling was almost as good... no it wasn't, but it was pretty good, and I felt disappointed that I wasn't going to get it this time.

“Michael?” I said as he finished arranging his clothing into a semblance of normalcy. “I have something important to tell you—”

“We’re done.”

I looked at him for a long moment, then chuckled.

“Yes, I know we’re done, but I really need to—”

“No, I don’t mean we’re done having sex in the meeting room. I mean you and me are done, period.”

I stared at him for a long moment, expecting it to be a joke. Then again, Michael was not known for his sense of humor. My heart broke in two, and the two halves each dropped down to my feet.

“Michael... why? Hasn’t it been good?”

“Oh, it’s been great. Best sex I ever had.”

“Then why?”

I couldn’t keep the despair out of my voice when I asked him.

“Because of several reasons. For one thing, I’m moving to another city for a while. I have a lot of new ventures to oversee. And for another, well, quite frankly, your work as my personal assistant leaves something to be desired.”

That came as a massive blow. I think maybe him saying that I was incompetent was just as painful as the breakup. If not, it was a close second.

“The sex, as good as it is, is not enough to make me ignore your poor work performance.”

“What are you saying, Michael?” I gasped, totally crushed.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he sniffed and shrugged as if it was no big deal. “You’re fired.”

Chapter Three

Jenna

My mind returned to my present circumstances, staring eye-to-eye with Michael Wallace. The man who fired me and broke up with me on the same day five years ago.

And he didn't recognize me. Not even a glimmer.

"Are you all right, miss?" the waitress cut in, but my eyes didn't stray toward her.

"I'm fine," I said without really thinking.

My eyes were focused on Michael's face. I was searching for any flicker of recognition, any semblance that I might have made a lasting impression on him. Instead, he was watching me with a polite smile.

I thought he had ripped my heart out five years ago, but I was learning right now that I was wrong. Because it was starting to crack in my chest with the strain of his smile as he waited for me to thank him.

Instead, I turned around and left without looking back.

The last man I'd expected to run into was Michael, and yet it had happened. It's all I thought about my entire way back home and it plagued me through the night.

The next day, I scrambled out of the office at around five thirty pm. I had originally planned to be out of there by three thirty, four at the latest. But then the vice president of

international development called me with a minor crisis, and I had to do a lot of mental gymnastics to figure out a solution.

Naturally, every single thing that could have gone wrong, did go wrong. I couldn't catch a cab for the life of me, and when I eventually did get one the driver spoke so little English he took me to the wrong apartment building. Twice.

He cussed me out when I didn't tip. At least, I think it was cursing. Obviously I didn't speak the same language, but his eyes and tone suggested that he thought I was kind of a piece of shit. Well, he made me even later than I had to be.

I raced inside the building lobby and took the elevator to the top. I broke into a half-run as I made it down the carpeted hallway. An elderly man with his arms full of mail and a garbage bag glared at me as I went past.

"Sorry, Mr. Lipkins," I said as I passed him.

"Humph. You youngsters are always in such a hurry."

"You know how it is, Mr. Lipkins. This is the city that never sleeps after all."

"I couldn't sleep thanks to your kid screaming at the top of his lungs."

I frowned at him, but at that point he had gone back into his apartment. Funny, I thought he was on his way out. Maybe he was and forgot. Or maybe he didn't want to give me a chance to respond to his zinger.

At any rate, I made it to apartment 227 and rapped on the door. From behind the polished wood surface, I heard a muffled scream.

“Mom!”

Thump thump thump bang!

A small child had run across the floor and then collided with the door so hard it shuddered. I winced as the sound of a latch being undone reached my ears. The door swung open and a four-year-old boy with wispy blonde hair and liquid blue eyes threw his arms around my stocking-clad legs.

“Mom! Mom! I did it! All by myself, I did it! Tell her, Grandma, tell her I did it all on my own.”

My mother stepped out into view. It had been she who’d opened the door. As I bent down to scoop up my child, she favored me with a grin.

Her careworn face always lit with a smile when I showed up. No matter how late I was running, no matter how much of a handful my son had been, she always wore that same comforting smile. She pushed up her red horn-rimmed glasses on her nose and chuckled.

“We made cookies, and I let him roll out the dough. He did a very good job.”

I beamed a smile at my son.

“Did you, Damon? You made cookies?”

“Uh huh,” he said, bobbing his head like his neck was a spring. “I sure did.”

“Did you save me any?”

“No, I ate them all up!”

I laughed as my mother shook her head.

“You most certainly did not, Damon. I would never let you eat so many cookies before dinnertime.”

I favored my mom with an apologetic frown.

“I’m so sorry I was late. Again.”

“Oh, think nothing of it,” Mom said, waving off my concerns figuratively and literally. “I love spending time with my grandbaby.”

Damon scoffed, and looked at her like she’d betrayed him.

“I’m not a baby anymore, Gramma.”

“You’ll always be my baby, sweetie.” She tousled his hair, and his sour mood lifted like a veil of fog from the sun-splashed ocean.

“Besides,” my mother continued, giving me ‘that look’ that every daughter knows all too well. Every unmarried daughter that is. “I hoped that maybe you were running late because you’d met a worthy man at last.”

“There are no worthy men,” I said without irony or a trace of sarcasm.

Mom shrugged as if to accede the point.

“Okay, thanks Mom,” I said, balancing Damon on my hip as I turned to leave. “I’ve got to get this little guy home and feed him dinner.”

“Mom,” Damon said, again sounding betrayed. “You said we could go to the park after you got off work. You promised.”

“I know, sweetie, but I didn’t know I was going to be so late.”

“You promised.”

“I know I did, but aren’t you hungry?”

Damon shook his head. Maybe with all of those cookies—I knew my mom let him have more than just one—he really wasn’t hungry yet. Besides, I remembered the last time I’d taken him to the park after dinner. The pigeons were really happy that he’d thrown up his chicken nuggets, but I was more than a little bit disturbed. Damon just got so excited at the park.

“All right, let’s go to the park,” I said. “But you have to eat all the veggies on your plate when we get home. Deal?”

“Deal!” he said excitedly. Then he offered me his hand, pinky finger extended. “Pinkie swear.”

“Pinkie swear,” I said, hooking my finger with his tiny one and shaking.

We headed back down to street level. Since the park was just a stone’s throw away from my mom’s apartment, I decided we could walk. After about half a block, I set him down because he was getting heavy, not to mention squirmy.

I swear sometimes he is half-worm.

We reached the park, and I felt a sense of ease come over me. As stressful as my life is, watching my son play made me feel so much better about everything. The sun-dappled shadows of leaves onto the sidewalk, creating patches of light and dark. Damon made a game out of hopping between the shadows, not letting himself touch the sunlight.

“If you touch the sun, you explode!” he said.

“What are you, a vampire?”

“An umpire?”

“No, a vampire.” I bared my teeth. “Bleah! I want to suck your blood!”

He burst into giggles as I made like I was going to get him. I chased him around the playground structure a few times, but then I got tired and had to take up a position on a park bench.

Damon raced up the steps of the wooden structure. At the top step, he tripped and fell flat on his face. I winced, rising from the bench to see if I could help him. To my surprise, he shook it off and got up to run some more.

“Are you all right, buddy?” I asked him as he tromped across a suspension bridge all of three feet off the playground.

“I’m fine, Mom,” he said. “I meant to do that.”

“I’m sure you did.”

He climbed all over that structure like Spider-man. I was glad to have his exuberance and energy on display. It helped me think about other things than just running into Michael again. Any other thing would have been preferable to that.

I still couldn’t believe I’d met him again after so long. I’d thought that he had moved to another city. Maybe he did, and he was just in town on business. It would be so like Michael to eat at his own restaurant. I guessed that then he could do whatever he wanted.

Eventually, Damon tired of playing on the structure. I don’t know how he didn’t collapse into a puddle of goo. The kid never stopped moving. I really wished that I could have his energy. Then maybe my rigorous schedule wouldn’t be so rough.

“Mom,” he said as he bounced up to me. “Can we go to Chuck E. Cheese tomorrow?”

“I’m sorry, buddy,” I said, tousling his hair and pinching his cherubic cheek. “You know Mommy has a long day tomorrow. I have meetings in the morning, work in the afternoon, and a late meeting with Mr. Jones and his sales team. You’ll be eating dinner with Gramma tomorrow.”

“Yay, I love Gramma’s cooking.”

“What about my cooking?” I said, pretending to be more miffed than I really was.

His little face scrunched up with deep thought. Then he opened his mouth and spoke.

“I love your cooking times a hundred, but I like grandma’s cooking times a million.”

“Well, at least you like what I make,” I said.

“Gramma doesn’t make me eat all my veggies before I have my dessert,” he said in a conspiratorial whisper. “But I’m not supposed to say that, so you have to, um, pretend like you don’t know.”

“My lips are sealed,” I said as he raced off to chase after a group of pigeons. They fluttered off into the air as I considered sending my mother a text about my son’s dietary needs. I wondered if they were the same pigeons who had joyously devoured his vomit the last time we were at the park, then decided that was a really gross line of thought for such a lovely afternoon.

Evening, really. The sun was sinking toward the horizon. Soon the streetlights would start flickering on. Yet, I hated to

cut his time at the park short.

After zipping around the merry-go-round a few times, Damon raced up to me and grabbed my arm.

“Mom,” he said. “Those people are feeding the ducks. Can we feed the ducks? Can we Mom, huh, please? Please can we feed the ducks?”

“I didn’t bring any bread with me sweetie,” I said.

“That’s okay, we can buy a pretzel and give it to them,” he said, pointing at a pretzel vendor.

“Okay, but you still have to eat your dinner. No snacking on pretzels and then telling me you’re full.”

“I promise Mom,” he said, bobbing his head up and down.

I took him to the vendor, and bought one of those big soft baked pretzels. I asked for a plain one, with no butter. The ducks probably didn’t want to eat the butter anyway. Or if they did, well too bad they weren’t getting any this time.

We went up to the shores of the lake. Those greedy little waterfowl started quacking like crazy, paddling over to us with their orange webbed feet. I think they recognized us and knew they always got something good off of my son.

“Remember, Damon,” I said as he tore off a huge chunk and tossed it in the water. “Tear it into small enough bits so they don’t choke.”

“I will, Mom,” he said, tearing off a slightly smaller piece. I counted that as a victory and watched as he broke off the pretzel until there wasn’t any of it left.

“All gone,” he said, dusting his hands off and waving at the ducks. “Bye ducks.”

He continued to wave goodbye to the ducks even as we walked away, clinging to my hand and stumbling since he wasn't watching where he was going.

“We've talked about this, Damon. Keep your eyes looking forward while you're walking or you're going to fall. You don't want to skin your knee again, do you?”

“Uh uh,” he said, shaking his head vehemently.

I tried to take him home, but then he saw one of his friends on the slide and begged to go there. I indulged Damon and settled down on a bench while he played. I resisted glancing at my phone, as usual, though I had heard it ding several times. I was *not* going to be one of ‘those moms’ who spend all of their time staring at the phone when they took their kid to the park.

Still, even as I watched my son play, my mind wandered back to my encounter at the restaurant. I had already forgotten Jim or Joe or whatever his name had been. Michael had come to my rescue like a dashing knight of yore.

And then he had stared right at me, a woman with whom he'd been intimate, and there was not a glimmer of recognition in his eyes. Not one whit.

It didn't help that Damon looked so much like his father. He had Michael's nose, and the same heavy brow. He had my eyes, though.

It had taken me a long time—months? Years?—to stop seeing Michael's face every time I looked at my son. Now that

feeling was back and then some. Back with a vengeance, perhaps it was appropriate to say.

Damon bounced off the slide and came trotting over to me. He looked at me, and I guess I had a sour or wistful expression on my face. Maybe both. Sourly wistful, that's me.

"Mom," he said, his little voice filled with worry. "Are you all right? Are you sad about something?"

"No, sweetie," I lied. "I'm not sad about anything at all."

He nodded, but then he tilted his head to the side like a dog trying to figure out if you've thrown the ball or hidden it behind your back.

"Mom," he said. "Is this about my daddy?"

My jaw dropped open. It had to be a coincidence, and yet it stung like the dickens. I'm not sure what I said in response, if anything.

It had to be a coincidence. It simply HAD to be. And yet, what were the odds? Damon asked why he didn't have a daddy like the other kids he knew from time to time, but I always told him that his daddy had to move far, far away.

On the same day that I met Michael again, Damon just happened to have talked about daddy... and he wasn't much for talking about such things most of the time.

Before I could respond, my phone rang with one particular tone. The only tone which I would ever consider answering while with my son in the park. I took hold of Damon and put him on my lap so he wouldn't wander off while I was on the phone.

“Yes, Mr. Jones?” I said as I answered the call.

“Jenna, I need you in the office ASAP. Something’s come up.”

“On my way, sir,” I said.

It looked like our day at the park had come to a close.

Chapter Four

Michael

The trouble with billionaires is that they're fucking annoying.

I know that I'm a billionaire saying that. But you know the old adage, and how it goes. It takes one to know one. And I'll admit right out of the door that Evan Jones was an annoying bastard to do business with.

And yet, I found him less annoying than most people. Okay, maybe not less annoying. Less troublesome, though, for sure. That's a good way to put it. Evan Jones was less troublesome to deal with than most people.

Evan sat across from me in his office, one leg draped over the other, knee bouncing with energy. He gave me most of his attention, but from time to time he would glance at his phone. I couldn't fault him for that. Who knew what crises were coming up that he had to deal with? I decided not to take it personally.

Looking at Evan Jones, I figured it probably wasn't his fault he kind of annoyed me. Most people did. I had found very few people who had ever *not* been at least a little bit grating on my nerves. I guessed that said a lot about me and my character.

"So," I said, tapping my finger on a stack of printouts on my desk. "It looks like we're in agreement for most of the details, then."

“Most of them, yes,” Evan said. “I still don’t know why you think we need to keep the overseas office in Montenegro. Wouldn’t it be more efficient to just have the one home office and run everything from there?”

I opened up the stack of papers and shuffled through them until I found the one I needed.

“Yes, that’s normally true. But there’s a reason why I want NonPoint Athletic Equipment to keep the Montenegro office.”

I slid the paper across the table toward him. He cocked an eyebrow and took it from me.

“Let me see here...” he peered at the page, his eyes narrowing. “Oh, I see. They have a key distribution nexus for worldwide shipping.”

“Exactly,” I replied.

He stood up and handed me the page back. While he did so, his phone tilted in his hand and I got a look at his screen. I saw a picture of him and his wife and kid. *That* was what he’d been distracted by? Not business, but something as insipid as family?

“Well, I think it’s time to pull the trigger on this,” I said, ignoring the pictures on his phone. “We’ve been discussing it for some time now.”

“Yes, we have,” Evan said, cocking his eyebrow at me. “In secret, so as not to cause any kind of consternation or sudden sell-offs, yes?”

“That’s right. But you and I both know that for the next step we’re going to have to involve more people.”

Evan nodded sagely.

“Indeed. We’ll need to put together a whole team of people we can trust.”

I nodded back.

“Trust is crucial. We don’t want any leaks whatsoever on this matter. That means we need to be very, very, VERY careful about who we involve in this merger.”

We were not, in fact, merging our entire business empires. Just one holding of mine, and one of his. NonPoint Athletic Equipment was mine, while he owned Leisure Unlimited. We had both settled on calling the resulting company NonPoint, because leisure and sports are not synonymous in most people’s heads any longer.

He looked up at me and frowned.

“Have you given any thought as to who you want to lead this project on your end?”

I snickered.

“That’s easy. I have a candidate in mind. He’s kind of surly, and stinks up the place with his cigars, but he’s also damn good at his job and the only man I can rely on.”

Evan laughed and sat back in his chair.

“So, I take it that you want to handle the leadership duties on your end yourself, then?”

“You take it correctly.” My face crossed with a puzzled frown. “I’m surprised you’re not leading the team on your end as well”

“Ah, but that’s the difference between me and you, Michael,” he said with a snicker. “I know how to delegate.”

I shrugged.

“I know how to delegate.”

“Hmm. That might be true, but I am the one between us who is *willing* to delegate. Doing it all on your own leaves you stressed out and with no time left to smell the roses and enjoy life.”

“I enjoy the hell out of my life. I enjoy the hell out of making money, and making money IS my life. So I don’t know how you can say things like that to me. Not all of us have... distractions.”

I stopped myself from directly referring to his family as a ‘distraction,’ but I sure as hell implied it.

Evan had a strange reaction. He didn’t get angry, or even comically miffed as I had expected him to. Instead, he got this almost smug look on his face. Like he knew something I didn’t know, and couldn’t wait to see me stumble right into it. But after working for eighteen hours I was exhausted and probably seeing things.

I decided my best bet was to change the subject before I got more confused or he decided to be angry about what I’d said about his family, and called off the merger.

“So, you really want to delegate this to someone else?” I shook my head and snorted. “I mean, we’ve worked very hard on this. I’d hate to see things go south now because of someone incompetent.”

His smile faded.

“You really think I would hire anyone who wasn’t competent?”

“That’s not what I said. Even great employees have their moments of incompetence. But if you handled things yourself, at least you know who to blame if things get fucked up.”

“Things aren’t going to get fucked up.”

“They won’t if you take care of the leadership on this project yourself,” I said.

Evan arched his brows.

“I am going to delegate this to someone who I trust implicitly. You might say this individual is like my right hand. I’m not sure if I could get anything done at this point without my assistant.”

“Come on,” I said with a sigh. I was starting to lose this discussion and I knew it. “You know that ordinary people are unreliable, incompetent, and untrustworthy.”

“You think everyone is that way, ordinary or not. The only person that you trust is yourself.”

I shrugged as if that should be obvious.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Well, to be honest, it is a bad thing,” Evan said. “Don’t get me wrong. Not that long ago I thought exactly the same way as you. I’ve seen the light, though.”

I gave him a sour look.

“This is all so you can spend more time with your family, isn’t it?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. But that’s not the whole story.”

“Then enlighten me, what is the whole story?”

He chuckled and took a deep breath, held it for a moment and then let it out.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m enjoying the fresh, breathable air that we have here. Of course, if it weren’t for the Amazon Rainforest, we might not have any air to breathe at all.”

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

“Here we go again. Evan Jones, philanthropist and world savior.”

“If you like,” he said, not taking offense at my hyperbole. “I do want to spend more time helping Amanda with her charity work, though.”

I laughed and shook my head sadly.

“You, my friend, have come down with a terrible affliction.”

“And what might that be?”

“You’ve become... housebroken. Domesticated. No longer a wild animal.”

“Oh, I’m still plenty hungry,” he said with a laugh. “I know exactly where you’re coming from, Michael. I used to be there myself, dwelling on the same old thought patterns.”

“And then what happened?” I asked.

“I met Amanda, that’s what happened.”

I groaned.

“You’re proving my point. You’re domesticated now buddy.”

“Am I?” he laughed. “If that’s the case, I like the way domestication feels.”

I hadn’t expected him to just shrug that off.

“Amanda changed my world.” He said that utterly without irony, without pretense. Like he really meant it. I realized then that’s because he did. He really did believe it. It wasn’t hype or the usual ‘of course I love my wife’ schtick that most guys give you when they get snagged by a woman who wants a ring on her finger.

“I’m happy, Michael,” he continued. “I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my entire life. Believe it or not, there are some things more important than making money.”

I gasped and pounded my chest comically, as if I were having a heart attack.

“I’m going to die of shock.”

“Stop being dramatic. It’s true. There are a lot of things more important than making money. Besides, I already have a lot of money. And after this merger goes through, I’ll have even more.”

“If,” I said cautiously. “the person you want to delegate your leadership role to isn’t incompetent.”

“Oh, my candidate is most competent,” he said with utter confidence. I actually wished I could feel that way, as strange as it may sound. I thought that it must have been nice to actually rely on someone. I couldn’t fathom it, but it must have been nice. “You know, if you had a wife at home, you might feel the same way that I do.”

“Not going to happen.”

“You never know, maybe someone you already know will end up *domesticating* you.”

I frowned, but this line of conversation was taking me back to the other night at the restaurant.

I had locked gazes with a gorgeous woman, and I had even come to her rescue to save her from some rube. And yet, she had *not* fallen all over herself with gratitude. She didn't fall at all. I'm used to getting what I want out of women, and when she had run off without barely saying a word I had been left utterly flabbergasted.

Worse, that woman had seemed so familiar for some reason, and I couldn't get her out of my head. I'd even dreamed of her the night after our encounter in the restaurant. I was worried that maybe she was an old hookup. I'd had so many it was impossible to keep track.

“Anyway,” Evan said, bringing my mind back to reality. “My decision is final. I'm going to delegate this merger on my end to the person I have in mind.”

“And who is this wonderful man?” I asked mockingly. “Is he out there on the Hudson, walking on water?”

A rap on the door drew his attention.

“Come in,” he said, then turned to look at me with a grin. “I don't believe I said anything about a man.”

“Oh come on,” I said with an exasperated sigh. “Don't tell me you're turning this over to your wife...”

My voice trailed off as the door opened and a woman in a smart business suit walked in. Not his wife, who I had met several times. No, it was not his wife. But I did know her.

It was, of course, the same woman I had met at the restaurant the other night.

Now, seeing her in business attire, I recognized her. I remembered where I knew her from.

“Hello, Jenna,” I said dryly. “I’d say long time no see, but we just saw each other last night, didn’t we?”

Evan looked between the two of us.

“Oh, you two know each other? Well, this is great,” Evan said, clapping his hands together. “Since you’re already acquainted, it should be easy for you to work together. Jenna, let me tell you about the merger I want you to take point on —”

“No,” she said, cutting him off.

Evan blinked, and then stared in confusion.

“No?” he repeated.

“No,” Jenna said, turning her icy gaze on me. “I’m not working with him. There’s no need to explain anything about the project because I’m not going to lead it. I will not work with this man. You can fire me if you want, it doesn’t change a damn thing.”

I was taken aback, but I didn’t get to be one of the world’s richest men by not being able to think on my feet.

“It looks like the two of you have something to work out,” I said, sounding jovial. I was feeling jubilant for some reason,

excited even. “I’ll leave you to it.”

I headed out of the office, feeling Jenna’s eyes boring holes into my back. I figured that this was only a minor setback. Not only that, but I might even be able to turn it to my advantage.

I believed that if Jenna took the reins on Evan’s end, then I would be able to influence her easily. I’d been her boss once before, after all.

How hard would it be to do it again?

I left the office behind and entered the lobby area outside of it. I was surprised to see that the lobby had an occupant, a young child of about four or five. He looked oddly familiar to me for some reason, but I couldn’t quite place it.

Then the kid looked up at me, and I saw the resemblance. When he spoke it all but confirmed my suspicions.

“Hey mister, is my mom still in there? Did you see her?”

This had to be, without a shadow of a doubt, Jenna’s son. And he was trying to talk to me.

Normally, I’d ignore anyone trying to strike a casual conversation with me, but it was different with kids. I didn’t find children to be annoying. Kids were without guile. The child didn’t care if I was rich, and he didn’t have ulterior motives.

“Why hello there,” I said, wondering who Jenna had hooked up with to produce a child. It had been many years since I had seen her last. “Is your mom named Jenna?”

He nodded, his cute eyes staring intently at me.

“Then yes, I did see her. I think she’s talking to Mr. Evan right now, but I’m sure she’ll be out soon.”

I looked down at the paper he had been coloring on.

“Is that a giraffe?”

He looked at me like it was the dumbest question he’d ever heard. It was refreshing, because nobody dared to look at me like that in my daily life.

“It’s a brachiosaurus,” he said as if the answer should have been obvious.

“Oh, it’s a dinosaur,” I said. “I see it now.”

I decided to do a little bit of fishing.

“So, Jenna is your mom, what about your dad? What’s his name?”

His face scrunched up with all seriousness.

“Mommy says he’s gone, but Gramma says we can find me a new daddy.”

He cocked his head to the side and looked at me more intensely than a kid that young has any right to.

“Do you want to be my daddy?”

Chapter Five

Jenna

“You turned down a huge opportunity like that because your sleazy ex was going to be involved?” Mom shook her gray head of hair and sighed. “Jenna, Jenna, Jenna... you really need to think these things through more thoroughly.”

I held my tongue, because I wanted to raise my voice and get sassy with her. But Damon was playing in the next room, and the door was open a crack so we could watch him. I didn’t want him to hear Mom and Gramma fighting, so I kept my voice down when I responded.

“Mom, you don’t understand,” I said, my voice terse but low and soft. “It’s not just any ex. It’s *him*.”

“It’s him? Who’s him?” Mom’s face creased with confusion. “Him who? Oh, wait, is this the face-licker guy you dated back in college?”

My face turned red and I clapped a hand over my eyes.

“No! Not the face licker guy, Mom.” I winced, and lowered my volume before I spoke, casting a glance through the open door to make sure that my son hadn’t heard me.

“Not the face licker,” I repeated much softer. “HIM. You understand?”

“No, I don’t. You mean the guy with the green teeth and the confederate flag hanging in his garage?”

“No, Mom,” I said through gritted teeth. I gestured toward the room where Damon was playing. “HIM.”

Mom’s mouth gaped open, and her eyes went wide.

“Oh. OH. Him.”

“Yes, him.”

Mom chewed that over for long enough that I initially thought I’d won and the conversation was over. I should have known better.

“Oh well,” Mom said, waving dismissively. “How long is the merger going to take?”

“For two companies that large, involving huge egos and even huger bank accounts?” I did the math in my head. “At least four and a half months. Six months is probably more likely.”

“Six months of working with...” she looked into the room where Damon played. “HIM is still worth it, Jenna. This is a huge opportunity for you. It’s precisely what you need to move to the next level.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits as she regarded me.

“Or are you planning on being a personal assistant for the rest of your natural life?”

“I have enough money to take care of us. All of us,” I retorted. “Evan pays me very well for all of my hard work. I don’t need the shares I’ll get as compensation for leading our half of the merger team, all right? We don’t need it.”

“It’s not just about the money, honey,” Mom said, unintentionally rhyming. “Now I’m not the financial whiz

that you are, but I've learned a thing or two while listening to your ranting and raving about work.”

“Ranting and raving?” I said, but she was on a roll and ignored me.

“I know that the real money isn't in salary in your profession. It's in stock options. And if you take those stock options, you're going to be so rich you won't have to work any longer. You see?”

I opened my mouth for a retort, then closed it as I mulled her words over. I had not considered that at all. I had not considered just how much wealthier the stock options would make me at the end of the merger.

“Think about it, Jenna,” Mom said, moving over to me and putting her hand on my shoulder. “Just think about it for a minute, will you please? If you don't have to go to work, you'll actually get eight hours of sleep a night. Not to mention think of all the time you can spend with Damon, not to mention your mother. We could spend time as a family, actually go places and do things together.”

“We go places and do things,” I said, but I was on the defensive and we both knew it. Her jabs were landing right where she wanted them to.

“Once in a blue moon, and then you just sit there falling asleep the whole time. We don't get to spend any quality time with you on the rare occasions that you do get a day off.”

She heaved a long sigh.

“And another thing—how many times have we been someplace, having ‘family’ time as you put it, and then you

have to run off and leave me and Damon so you can go back to work? You don't have a good work-life balance, Jenna, and it's not healthy."

I winced, because I felt like that was hitting below the belt.

"What? How can you say that, Mom? It's my hard work that pays for this apartment, and for Jack's top tier, private daycare, or anything else for that matter."

"Don't get all huffy and defensive," Mom said. "Deep down on some level you know I'm right. Ever since you got fired by, um..."

She looked over into the room where Damon was playing still.

"Him, you've been killing yourself trying to prove how hardworking and competent you are."

"That's not true," I said, a little bit loud. Damon looked up from his dinosaurs and I cringed. I lowered my voice before I spoke again. "That's not true."

"Isn't it?"

Mom caressed my cheek like she did when I was little. It made me feel somewhat better.

"Look, Jenna, I don't mind taking care of Damon while you're working. But I'm not getting any younger. Someday I may not be able to do that for you anymore. And besides..."

She looked over at Damon and her lips became a thin, tight line.

"A child needs his mother, and you can't be that for him if you're always working. Someday I'm going to be gone."

I rolled my eyes, and I have to admit I really didn't like thinking about that sort of thing.

"That's just old people talk," I said, a little bit harshly. "You're always going on about how you have one foot in the grave, and you'll probably outlive all of us."

"I don't know about that," Mom said with a sigh. I think she knew I didn't like all of this talk about her dying. Her lips stretched in a small smile. "You know, I just thought of another reason you should call Evan and tell him that you've reconsidered, and you want the leadership role."

"And what, pray tell, is that?" I asked, smiling a little myself because I could tell she was being mischievous. A good thing she was, too, because things had been getting pretty tense and we really needed an injection of levity at that moment.

"If you work for the new company, the newly merged one I mean, you might meet a good man."

"Oh for fuc—"

I looked over at Damon and lowered my tone.

"For heavens' sake, mom, will you give it a rest? I do not need a man in my life. Okay? I don't."

"Dear, don't you ever get lonely, though?"

"No, I don't get lonely," I said scoffingly. Maybe a little bit too scoffingly. Her barbs were really landing that day. "I have Damon, and I have you, and, and..."

I couldn't think of anything else.

"And that's enough for me," I said quickly, hoping she hadn't noticed that I really didn't have anyone in my life but the two

of them at that point.

“Well, okay, fine,” Mom said. “Let’s assume, for the sake of argument, that you’re right. You don’t want or need a man. That’s okay for you. But what about Damon?”

“What about him? You don’t think I can raise him on my own? Are you one of those misogynists who thinks that a man has to be present for everything or it turns out to be a disaster?”

“You’re deflecting, and that’s because you know I’m right. Damon asks about his father. A lot.”

“Not that much,” I said. “He hardly ever mentions it.”

“Sweetie,” Mom said with a sigh and a sad look in her eyes. “You’re almost never home, so how would you know?”

That really stung. I blinked back tears as I looked over at Damon.

“You know,” my mom said, going over to the fridge. “I have something to show you.”

She removed one of Damon’s crayon drawings. This one featured a man with yellow hair and a business suit smiling. It had the usual grotesque deformations of a young child’s drawing, and yet I thought that I could almost recognize the figure depicted.

“Look at this. He drew a picture of a nice man he met at Evan’s office. He’s craving a male role model in his life, Jenna. That’s not misogynistic to say, either. It’s something that all of his friends have and he wonders why he does not.”

I stared at the drawing in my hands, the sad truth slowly dawning. It had to be Michael. Who else would Damon have had the chance to meet? No one was allowed up on that floor of the building other than those who were invited. That was why I had felt safe leaving my son to play by himself while I had my admittedly brief meeting with Evan and Michael.

“Oh my goodness,” Mom said with a gasp. “It really is Damon’s father, isn’t it?”

I hung my head, dejected. Yes, it really was his father.

“Sweetie,” Mom said, her lips forming an inverted U. “Don’t you think that maybe it’s time you told Michael about his son? I mean, they’ve already met at this point.”

My eyes narrowed, and my voice sounded harsh even to my own ears.

“You don’t know this man,” I snapped. “He’s a cold, unfeeling jerk. He doesn’t need or want anyone in his life. I don’t want Damon exposed to that kind of element.”

“Oh come on, he needed you at one point, didn’t he?”

“Until he fired me.”

“It’s been a long time. Maybe he regrets firing you and breaking up with you with equal measure?”

I sucked in a deep breath of air, held it for a long moment, and then slowly let it out to calm myself down.

“You don’t know this guy, Mom,” I said more softly than I had before. “You just don’t. There’s a good reason I can’t tell Michael that Damon is his son.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What reason?”

“Michael sees the world in shades of dark gray. Everyone is just one step removed from trying to fuck him over and steal his money.” I sighed. “If I told Michael, he would just assume I was trying to use Damon to get something out of him. Money or whatever.”

Mom frowned, but I could see the wheels turning behind her eyes. She was actively thinking about what I had said for a change instead of trying to find ways to dismiss it.

“That’s why I never told him I was pregnant in the first place, Mom.” I looked out the window as rain hit the glass pane with a gentle tattoo. “If I had, he would have almost certainly thought it was a scheme to try and get him to take me back. Or a scheme to get his money, which is a lot more likely in Michael’s worldview.”

Mom chewed that over for a moment. Then the tea kettle whistled and it created a temporary reprieve. We went to our neutral corners, metaphorically speaking, while she poured us each a cup of chamomile.

“Jenna,” she said as she handed me my cup. “I want to ask you something, and I don’t want you to take it the wrong way.”

“That’s not a good way to preface something, Mom.”

“Just bear with me, please.” She sipped her tea, made a face, and added some honey and lemon to it. “Do you still have feelings for Michael?”

My heart thudded in my chest. It was like a panic attack. On reflex, I hotly denied the charges levied against me.

“Of course not,” I snapped. “That big jerk? Ha. He had his chance and he blew it. I don’t harbor any feelings for him any longer... except maybe for contempt.”

“Well then, good,” she said with a smile.

“Wait... you think that’s good?” I sputtered. “Why on God’s green earth would you think that?”

“Because,” she said with a hint of triumphant smugness. “if you don’t have feelings for Michael any longer, there’s no reason to turn down Evan’s merger offer, now is there?”

She gave me a look like ‘gotcha, didn’t I?’ and stood there beaming a smile at me.

I looked into the other room at Damon, and then gave a resigned sigh of defeat. I went over to Damon and picked him up, balancing him on my hip. I dug out my phone from my jeans pocket with my free hand and flipped through my contacts list until I came to Evan’s number. My finger hovered over the green phone icon for a long moment before I finally pushed it.

Evan picked up on the very first ring. Smug bastard was waiting for me like he knew I was going to call him back.

“Evan?” I said, clearing my throat. “I accept your offer.”

Chapter Six

Jenna

The big day arrived at last. It was time for the Leisure Unlimited and NonPoint merger to begin in earnest. That meant I had to introduce my hand-picked team to their counterparts from Michael's side.

We sat in the boardroom on the highest level of Michael's building. Outside, a sheet of iron gray clouds darkened the horizon. Disconcerted by nature's brewing fury, I turned my attention back to the meeting itself. Things were about to get started.

Michael strolled into the room—late, trying to show me that I had no control over him, I guess—and was followed by three executives in impeccably tailored suits. They all looked the same to me. I mean, they did have different facial features, but they had pretty much the same haircuts and style of suits on. All in hues of gray or charcoal, as if they were trying to dress like one of those Japanese superhero shows where everyone wears a matching outfit.

Michael took up residence on the opposite side of the table, though he didn't actually sit down. He stood, looming over everyone else because of his height. Probably did that on purpose too, so he could look down on me as I sat.

"Good morning," he said as if he weren't fifteen minutes late. "For those of you who don't know me, I'm Michael Wallace."

“We all know who you are,” I said dryly.

He slightly cocked an eyebrow at that but otherwise continued as if I had not spoken.

“Allow me to introduce my team. This is Chad Denning.”

He gestured at the first man on his team. I couldn’t remember a name as dull as Chad so in my mind I thought of him as Chad the C.H.U.D. He kind of had that escaped from the sewers look in spite of his well-groomed appearance.

“Chad is an expert in corporate mergers. In fact, he’s overseen over forty-six of them, personally.”

Chad beamed a smug smile. I instantly didn’t like him.

“Seated beside him,” Michael said of the red-haired man. “Is Blake Simon. Blake is the former CEO of Sporting Dynamics, a company I acquired last year. Now he works for me, and I would like him regarded as an expert witness on all things having to do with the sporting world.”

“Nice to meet you all,” Blake said. He was polite and all, but he had a cocky veneer that rubbed me the wrong way.

“And last but not least, Trent Francis.” The brown-haired man nodded his head. He didn’t smile like the other two.

“Trent is a lawyer specializing in corporate mergers.”

Michael then looked at me as if to say ‘beat *that*.’ I smiled and gestured toward my team members.

“I’ll let my team introduce themselves. Becky, why don’t you go first?”

Rebecca stood up and adjusted her glasses.

“My name is Rebecca Storm. I have dual degrees from Harvard in law and economics.” She turned her gaze on Chad the Chud. “And I have personally overseen more than sixty corporate mergers.”

Becky sat back down, and my next team member stood up, adjusting his tie and pulling his ill-fitting pants up. He’d lost a lot of weight recently.

“My name is Joseph Joestar,” he said, stroking his beard. “I was actually retired last year, but with all of my kids gone to college, and my wife having passed on, well... the house was rather quiet. Too quiet, so I accepted Jenna’s offer.”

Blake snorted.

“And what were your qualifications again?” he said smugly.

“Mr. Joestar is a living legend in the business world,” Michael said, his eyes narrowing. “I suggest you respect him and his wisdom.”

I was glad of the vote of confidence from Michael, but then he turned and looked at me like I was supposed to be uber grateful. I returned his gaze with a blank stare.

The last member of my team stood up and adjusted his pastel-hued tie with slender fingers.

“My name is Polnaraff Epurer. I have dual citizenship with the United States and the glory that is France.” He offered a slight bow, green eyes blazing into everyone in the room. “My qualifications don’t quite speak for themselves like my esteemed colleagues. I am recently graduated from Brown University with a doctorate in corporate law.”

“A doctorate?” Chad scoffed. “Aren’t you a little bit young?”

“I’m twenty-seven, I hardly think that’s young. But don’t worry, I like older men.”

He gave Chad a wink and the latter turned red as a beet.

I noticed that Michael was still staring at me, as he had almost the entire time since he’d come into the room. I’m sure it was intended to be a power move, a method of intimidation on a subtle level.

But I didn’t feel intimidated. All I could think about was that was the way he used to look at me before, during, and after we had sex. A tingle passed in my lower belly and spread to the rest of my body. It certainly was distracting to have him looking at me like that.

“Well,” Trent said, shuffling papers around in front of him. “I’m just going to cut to the chase. With the exception of the esteemed Mr. Joestar, the three of us have far, far more experience at handling mergers of this level. No offense.”

Why do people always say no offense after they’ve said something really offensive?

“I agree with Trent,” Blake said stiffly. “We should definitely take the lead on this project. It just makes good, logical sense.”

“We need to be practical, and not worried about ruffling feathers,” Chad added. “This is business, after all, and not a knitting circle.”

I glanced over at Michael. He continued to stare at me, seemingly ignoring the members of his team as they nattered on about how wonderful and terrific they were at their respective jobs.

“Experience is always valuable,” I said, standing up and addressing the three members of Michael’s team. “But let’s not overstate the obvious. My team has far, far more academic credentials than yours does. Therefore, I’m not sure that either team should take the ‘lead,’ as it were. Instead, this should be a cooperative partnership.”

Chad scowled, and looked over at Michael as if expecting him to intervene. Michael didn’t seem to notice Chad, or if he did he gave no sign. He just continued to watch me with those damn bedroom eyes of his.

“I’m sure that you have a valid point,” Trent said, arching his brows and trying to sound diplomatic. Mostly failing, but at least he was putting in the effort. I can’t say the same for the other two members of Michael’s team. “But I really think we should take the lead. I mean, the new company is going to be called NonPoint. Therefore, the NonPoint team—that would be the three of us—should take the lead on this matter.”

I gave him a long look, and then broke into a chuckle.

“Ah, what’s in a name? Would a rose by any other name still smell as sweet?”

“Well,” Joestar said, joining me in my mirth, “canola plants used to be called stinkweed, and I don’t see anyone wanting their French fries coming out of stinkweed oil. But I think you’re forgetting something.”

“What’s that?” Chad asked, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“What Mr. Joestar is getting at,” I said, meeting Chad’s gaze spark for spark, “is that while the new company will be called

NonPoint, the current iteration of that company has a much lower market share than Leisure Unlimited. If we were going to take into account the old companies' performance, then we would probably take the lead on this. However, I suggest a more equitable split of duties between our two teams."

Chad had a look in his eyes like he'd just found the holy grail. He faced me with an eager light in his eyes.

"Ah, but did you know that NonPoint has a sales force three times as large as Leisure Unlimited? Our brand is better poised to take the big steps into a much larger world."

I pursed my lips as I constructed my rebuttal in my head.

"That's certainly true. However, being as the market share of NonPoint is so much smaller than Leisure Unlimited, it's easy to see why a larger sales force would be necessary."

Chad winced, while Trent and Blake exchanged glances. I had, sort of, insulted their company by insinuating that they were trying to play catch-up with us.

"You raise a good point," Trent said, trying to sound more reasonable. I couldn't help but notice a glint of fear in his eyes. Fear isn't respect, but it can sometimes lead to it if the fear comes from a place where the object of said fear is believed to be competent. "However, NonPoint has been a more established brand. It's been around for over sixty years, whereas Leisure Unlimited has been around for what, fourteen? Fifteen years?"

"And in that fifteen years Leisure Unlimited has carved its share of the market from Nonpoint and other brands." I shrugged. "We're going around in circles here. The fact

remains that a merger is supposed to be a cooperative enterprise. So all I'm saying is let's cooperate."

Michael shifted his stance and snorted. "What does a glorified secretary know about mergers of this magnitude, anyway?"

His words hit me like a slap. I got that burning tingle when the fight or flight response is triggered. Silence descended on the boardroom while members of both teams waited to see how I would respond.

Michael stood there, his eyes boring into me. I couldn't believe he would say such a toxic thing. If I told Evan he'd said something like that, the deal might just fall apart then and there. However, I really didn't want to be the catalyst for a merger this massive to go to hell. I wanted to find a way to salvage it.

If only flashes of memory weren't distracting me so much. I remembered when times were good with Michael. Not just in the bedroom... or the boardroom, for that matter, either. I remembered him being very attentive and thoughtful, almost sweet on some occasions.

None of that was going to do me any good if he was going to just torpedo my credibility by calling me a glorified secretary.

I decided that I had to take a firm stand against him. Michael was a man who saw himself as the epitome of alpha maleness. He was going to bluster and bully his way until he hit a brick wall. It was up to me to be that brick wall.

I stood up and forced myself to remain calm. With a ton of effort, I was able to keep myself from shaking. I put all of my

oomph into my voice, so it wouldn't waver when I spoke.

“This ‘glorified secretary’ is acting as the proxy, the vassal, and the representative of Evan Jones. One of the richest, most powerful men in the world, as well as a highly regarded philanthropist.”

I let that sink in while Michael stared hard at me. His eyes could probably stop a charging bull. But maybe I'd built up some resistance to his ice-cold glares while we were dating, if you want to call it that. I guess it was more of an affair. That was neither here nor there, however.

I stared right back at him without backing down an inch, on a metaphorical level. Our gazes locked and we waged a psychic battle of willpower. I kept waiting for Michael to say something, to try and demean or belittle me further, but he seemed to be waiting for my next move, too.

“Michael,” I said, using his first name to emphasize that in this room, we were equals. “Would you like to call up Evan right now and ask him the same question you just put to the room? You can ask him why he sent a ‘glorified secretary’ to represent him on a deal potentially worth billions of dollars. I wonder how he will take that? Your utter lack of confidence in what he's invested himself in?”

The tension grew so thick you could cut it with a knife. And not fun sexual tension, either, though there was a little bit of that. On my end, at least.

We continued to stare at each other, and I wondered which of us would be the first to break. I planned to do everything in my power to make sure it was not me who broke.

The immovable object was running right into the irresistible force. And billions of dollars were at stake.

The door to the boardroom opened up. Michael glared at the smartly dressed woman who entered.

“Melinda,” he said in a low growl. “I expressly said that there were to be no interruptions for this meeting. I hope you have a very good reason for disobeying a direct order from me.”

She bowed her head submissively and then walked into the room.

“My apologies, sir. But I really don’t think this matter can wait. It needs your immediate attention.”

He grunted and gestured loosely at her.

“Very well. What’s going on?”

“It would probably be better if I just showed you,” she said. Melinda synced up her phone with the projection screen via Bluetooth. After a moment, the loading circle disappeared and an image of one of those twenty-four-hour cable news stations appeared in its stead. The anchor was typical. Graying hair, boring face, and utterly deadpan delivery as he spoke.

“...News that has the potential to shake the financial world. Sporting goods juggernauts NonPoint and Leisure Unlimited are rumored to have begun talks about a possible merger. Between the two companies they hold over a third of the market share of world wide sporting goods sales, though Leisure Unlimited has a bigger chunk of that. Up next, our financial analyst Cynthia Rothrock will clue us in as to what

this merger could mean for investors, as well as the world at large...”

We all felt an intangible pall fall over us at the news. The merger hinged at the fact that we were keeping it ‘dark’ and out of the press.

Now our ‘secret’ merger had been exposed to the world. Who could have leaked the information to the press?

And what was their motivation?

Chapter Seven

Jenna

A jagged bolt of lightning lit up the sky bright as day, a line of pure white against the gathering darkness. It seemed an appropriate thing to happen right about then, after the monumental news about the merger had just aired on the big screen.

A lot of worried looks passed among us. Michael was furious. He gave few outward signs of it. His color darkened a bit, and his eyes glittered like they were ice crystals. I knew him fairly well, though. You might say intimately, and I knew that he was far angrier now than he was when actively yelling at people.

“This is intolerable.” He shook his head as if in denial of what we had just seen. “Intolerable. This meeting is adjourned until we figure out how this travesty happened.”

“Wait,” I said as he walked toward the door on legs stiffened by anger. “You can’t just adjourn the meeting. We have a lot of work to do on this merger.”

“If the merger is still on,” he growled as he pushed open the door. I turned to my team and sighed.

“I guess we’re done for now, but stay close just in case.”

They nodded back at me and I fled from the room as well. I didn’t bother to check and see how Trent, Chad, and Blake were taking the news. I had no time for them.

I followed Michael as he power-walked down the exquisitely carpeted hallway toward the express elevator.

“Hey,” I said. “Will you slow down? We need to discuss this.”

He stepped into the elevator car about ten paces ahead of me. When I saw Michael jamming his finger on the buttons, I started walking faster.

“Hey,” I snapped. “Don’t you dare take off without me.”

The doors closed, and I cursed. I went to the regular elevator and was in luck. The car awaited me as soon as I pushed the down arrow.

I got on and pushed the ground floor button, hoping I wouldn’t have to make too many stops on the way. Naturally, this meant that I stopped on about every other damn floor so someone else could get on. I was the first one to push the lobby button the second they boarded.

I grew more and more anxious that Michael would make his great escape before I could catch up with him. When the doors opened on the lobby level, I practically exploded out of the car and broke into a jog. Clop-clop-clop went my heels as I raced across the lobby’s polished marble floors.

I burst out of the entrance doors and into a light rain. I paid it no heed as I put my head on a swivel looking for Michael. I spotted him getting into his limo about twenty feet away.

“Oh no you don’t,” I growled. I rushed down the rain-slickened sidewalk. The glaze of rainwater turned the sidewalk into a sort of mirror, reflecting an upside-down version of myself back at me. Both of us raced up to the

limo's back door and flung it open before the car could start moving.

Michael darted his glance toward me as I got into the back seat with him.

“What in the fuck do you think you're doing, Jenna?” he sputtered. “I don't remember inviting you to ride with me.”

“And I don't remember telling you I was okay with ending the meeting so quickly, not to mention on an abrupt, sour note.”

“I don't have to get your permission,” he scoffed, kind of half-laughing even though his eyes remained hard. “I actually own one of the companies in this merger, unlike you.”

“And I represent the man who owns the other company in this merger. The bigger, more successful company.”

He snorted.

“If you measure success a certain way, I'm sure Leisure Unlimited does look a lot more successful than NonPoint.”

“Oh, it does a lot more than just look more successful. And what way would you prefer we measure the relative success of our companies? Finances? Profits? Market share? Because on all three of those accounts Leisure Unlimited has NonPoint beat cold.”

Michael grew tight-lipped, because he knew I was right. I continued right on with my diatribe.

“What exactly does NonPoint do better? Other than cornering the market on lame white guys in suits that cost way too much?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. I couldn't help but focus on his cupid's bow lips. They were sensual, soft if my memory served me correctly. In that very limo, I'd felt their soft caress all over my body...

It was really hard to think about anything else for a few seconds, but thanks to a herculean expression of willpower I managed it.

Michael grew more angry in his silence, and finally spat out words like vitriolic poison.

"You're just as incompetent as you were when you used to work for me. I'm glad I fired you or my company would probably be broke now."

That hurt, a lot, but I knew he was just lashing out at me personally because he couldn't argue with the points I had made.

"Nice straw man argument," I said crisply as I unsnapped my leather briefcase. The brass fasteners flipped with a mechanical snick. I opened up the case and took out my laptop.

"What are you doing?" he demanded as I turned it on and opened up a few tabs.

Instead of answering him, I locked gazes with Michael and let a little of my anger and frustration out.

"What is your problem? You've been nothing but nasty and dismissive to me ever since we started this merger process. Before even, when we met in Evan's office."

"You could have stuck to your guns and not worked with me," he pointed out. "My problem is a glorified secretary has

escaped the steno pool and is now fucking up a billion-dollar deal. My problem is that Evan Jones has gone soft thanks to his being domesticated, and now I have to deal with... you.”

His nostrils flared as he fumed in silence. His words kind of stung, but at the same time I felt the return of that aforementioned sexual tension. It was hard to forget all the times we'd had sex in the back of that very same limo.

A memory sprang to my mind unbidden, one of me bouncing up and down on his lap, screaming my lungs out, hands splayed on the ceiling overhead. I had torn a bit of the headliner with my pinky nail on that occasion.

I couldn't resist glancing up at that spot. To my surprise, Michael hadn't had the spot repaired. The hole was still there, a mar on an otherwise pristine interior.

“What are you doing?” he demanded again as I furiously typed on my laptop.

I glared up at him as my lips curled in a sneer.

“You lost the right to speak to me like that when you fired me.”

He sputtered, his face growing darker by the moment. I could feel his anger emanating off him in waves. In the old days, I'd have calmed him down in my own unique, inimitable way. Now, though, he was just going to fester and fume until he either exploded or managed to let it go. My money was on the first one.

Finally, he composed himself somewhat. Michael was still angry as hell, that's for sure. But he managed to keep his tone civil, even if it was a bit clipped when he spoke again.

“It was one of your team who leaked this matter to the press.”

He said it like it was an accepted fact. In the exact same way you might say the sun rises in the east, or that water was wet. His tone brooked no argument, but I was growing tired of his bluster. I closed one of the windows on my laptop and gave him another glare.

“How do you know that it wasn’t one of your team? Chad the CHUD seemed pretty mouthy to me.”

Michael snorted with derision.

“Chad might have a problem with filtering his words before they come out of his mouth, but there’s no way that he would have leaked this to the press.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he’s terrified of me. And for good reason. Used to be that you were smart enough to be scared of me, too.”

I laughed, and it was genuine for what that was worth.

“Michael, I was never scared of you. I respected you, but when you were going on and on about what a big, bad alpha male you were I was never intimidated. Not for a second.”

“Before or after we started sleeping together?”

I sucked in a gasp of air. He had finally addressed the elephant in the room. Namely our past history and semi-relationship.

“Both,” I said, recovering myself somewhat.

“Well, I guess my team has more common sense than you do. They would never dare to go against my will.”

I remembered him saying something like that to me before, but in a sexy way. I kind of liked it when he pinned me down and took charge of the situation. However, I didn't have time to think about all of the steamy sex we used to have.

He was very, very close to me, though. Close enough I could feel his body heat, and smell his cologne. I swallowed the lump that had suddenly formed in my throat.

"Look," I said, trying to keep my tone civil even though I was roiling with conflicting emotions. "We can deal with this later. Right now, you need to tell your driver to take us to the Meridian Room at the Mercury Hotel."

"What?" he frowned in confusion. His crow's feet crinkled around his eyes. They didn't make him look old or weak, but rather distinguished. Experienced. "Why in the hell would I tell my driver to go there of all places?"

"Because we have a press conference scheduled there."

"What?" he sputtered. "Since when?"

"Since I set it up," I said cryptically. "Now, you should just play nice, and let me handle things from here," I reached out and patted his knee. "Okay, Michael? I've got this. You just sit there and chew on nettles or whatever it is you do to stay so very, fucking, sour."

"You must be out of your goddamn mind, Jenna," he snapped. "You think I'm going to let you handle a fucking thing after you screwed this up? I know that it was your team who was responsible."

"I can assure you that my team members had nothing to do with this. They were just as surprised as all of you."

“Bullshit,” he snarled. “I don’t know how you organized this press conference so damn quickly, and I don’t give a damn. I’m going to handle it, though. Me. That way I can be sure that you won’t screw it up.”

I cocked an eyebrow at him and gave him a look.

“What?” he said after a moment when I wouldn’t stop.

“During our time together, didn’t you always say how much you can’t stand the press? And that you tended to lose your temper with them? Hmm? I do recall you saying that on multiple occasions.”

He grew tight-lipped. Michael wanted to argue, but he knew he was beat. I knew him better than he thought I did. I wondered if I knew him better than he knew himself, but that may have been going a bit far.

“See?” I said. “It’s better if you let me handle this. You know it and I know it.”

Lightning crashed outside. Michael pushed a button on the center console.

“Derek, I need you to take us to the Mercury Hotel. Stat.”

“Of course, Mr. Wallace.”

Michael looked back at me and glared, but didn’t say anything.

When we got to the hotel, it was swarming with journalists, even outside. When the hotel staff saw a limo pull up, they sprang into action. The bellhops and front desk staff formed an impenetrable ring around Michael and I, to escort us inside.

The press identified Michael almost immediately. Of course, they didn't know who I was, but they soon would. They shouted questions at him about the merger, but he didn't respond. I was glad for that, because he probably would have made things worse and not better by opening his mouth at that point.

We were escorted through the opulent lobby and into the Meridian Room. It was an expansive convention space with a high vaulted ceiling and cool-looking blue chandeliers. I took my position behind the podium, while Michael kind of hovered behind me.

“How did you get all of these reporters to show up so fast?” he asked.

I just smiled at him.

“Smile, Michael. We want to project an air of cooperation and confidence. This is a happy occasion and we're both tickled pink to be here. Even if you don't feel that way, try and fake it for a while, hmm?”

Oh, I loved the look on his face. He was flabbergasted and utterly taken off his guard. Men like Michael don't get that look in their eyes very often and I took a long moment to savor it, to burn it indelibly into my memory.

The tension was thicker than the rain falling outside in sheets like lead. I stepped up to the microphone and tapped it to make sure it was on.

“Good afternoon,” I said. “Thank you for joining us on this lovely day in New York City.”

My comment got the expected ripple of laughter.

“Why don’t we just open up the floor to questions?” I asked.

A lot of hands darted into the air. I pointed at one woman in particular.

“You there, in the green blazer.”

“Thank you. Do you know who leaked the news of this merger? Things like this are usually kept pretty hush-hush.”

I smiled at her and nodded.

“Yes, of course I know who leaked the information to the press.” I chuckled softly. “You might say I know her very well. I see her face in the mirror every day.”

Michael gasped and I spoke into the mic again.

“It was me.”

Chapter Eight

Jenna

The silence was deafening.

After my surprise announcement about my having leaked news of the merger to the press, the entire room grew deathly quiet. Shit, you'd think that I'd just announced that I was the shooter on the Grassy Knoll who killed JFK. I guessed that the merger really was a huge deal. I'd been so caught up in my feelings for Michael that I'd not been paying enough attention to the enormity of what we were doing, and the effect it would have on the world at large.

I'm not sure what happened next. One moment, the air had that tinge of electricity it has right before a massive thunderstorm is about to hit. Like everything was balanced on a knife's edge, and could have gone either way.

Then, the room exploded into a cacophony of shouted questions and cameras snapping pics non-stop. The flashes from the cameras reminded me of the lightning outside, though there were no windows in the convention hall.

“What is the new company going to be called?”

“Who first reached out to who on this merger?”

“Is it true that Evan Jones is merging all of his businesses to focus on charity work?”

“I heard that Joseph Joestar came out of retirement to work on this merger. Any truth to that rumor?”

I held my hands out, palms facing down.

“Now, now,” I said. “One at a time.”

They just kept shouting their questions. I could feel Michael shifting from foot to foot behind me. He was anxious, a rarity for a man some people thought of as being cold as ice. Not me, though. I knew how fiery he could be once the clothes started coming off.

I leaned in until my mouth was right over the mic.

“One at a time, please,” I said in a suddenly booming voice. The reporters quieted down, and once a general sense of order emerged from the chaos I felt ready to continue.

“Thank you,” I said as people lifted their hands in the air instead of screaming at the top of their lungs. I sought out one of the reporters who had *not* been shouting questions at me and pointed at him.

“You there, in the glasses.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said. He didn’t know who I was—not a big surprise since personal assistants just don’t get the same press as billionaire playboys—but he figured out I was somehow connected to the merger. Just how deeply he didn’t know, but it was obvious that I was a pivotal player. “Were you ordered to reveal this merger by Evan Jones or Michael Wallace?”

I shook my head as I spoke.

“No, I was not. Neither of those august personages had anything to do with the leak or this press conference. I imagine that my boss Evan is probably having a bit of a conniption right now, but in a moment all will be made clear.”

I spotted a reporter from one of the bigger cable news conglomerates. I had done my research and anticipated his arrival.

“You there, in the green tie,” I said, pointing him out. The nebbish little man stood up, a smirk curling the corners of his thin lips. His appearance struck me as that of a fish.

“I’m sure that our millions of viewers would like to know why Joe Joestar came out of retirement to help oversee a merger? Doesn’t he have plenty of money at this point? Are the rumors true?”

I frowned at him and shook my head. A carefully rehearsed reaction, because I had anticipated just what question he would ask, too. And I had a perfect rebuttal.

“I’m sorry, I thought that we were here to talk about business matters. Mr. Joestar’s personal life is his own business, and anyone who thinks that it might impact his business acumen I’ll point you to the fact that, were any silly rumors true, it would hardly be his first divorce. Not really the news your millions of viewers want to hear, I would imagine.”

Oh, the look on his face. It was priceless. He looked as if he’d just gone bobbing for apples in the swishing fetid offal at the bottom of a port-a-potty at a Grateful Dead concert.

I was loving every minute of it.

“Now, you with the very chic Armani blazer.”

A ripple of laughter rolled through the crowd as the female reporter stood up. I could feel Michael’s eyes boring into me. I risked a quick glance his way, and saw that he was smiling with his mouth, but his eyes were full of grumpy surprise.

Like I was exceeding his expectations and that upset him rather than delighting him.

It sort of hurt my feelings. I guess a part of me still wanted to impress him. Not with my body, or my adventurous nature in the bedroom. Not this time. I wanted to impress him with my work ethic and my intellect.

The fact that I still thought I needed validation from him somehow irked me on a lot of levels. The fact that I couldn't help but remember the times he'd looked at me with hungry eyes grated even worse.

I turned my attention back to the female reporter. I couldn't afford to let my mind get lost in the catacombs of memory and desire that lurked beneath every interaction I had with Michael now. This man had spoken to my child—his child—and maybe made some connections I didn't want him to make. Even if he didn't know, or even suspect, on some level it lurked in his mind.

“Leisure Unlimited has recently had something of a falling out with online payment processors, in particular StashApp and PalPayments. Given the vast amount of account holders both of those platforms have, is the newly merged company going to reach out to them for a newly negotiated deal?”

“That's an excellent question,” I said, nodding to her and smiling. I had been hoping that particular query would come up. “Actually, we have a tentative agreement to continue the NonPoint contracts with those two corporate entities when we merge the company.”

“What does tentative mean?”

“Look it up in the dictionary,” I said, because tentative meant that nothing had been put on paper yet, but we expected it to be. As my mom might have said, I didn’t want to write checks with my alligator mouth that my mosquito ass couldn’t cash.

Michael’s gaze intensified, practically burning a hole in my back. I knew that I had to move on from the awkward moment so I forged on ahead.

I called on another reporter.

“You there, the tall woman in the gray jacket.”

She stood up and faced me head-on.

“I have to know, why did you do it? Why did you leak information about this merger to the press in the first place?”

“I’m not sure I understand your question,” I said, frowning as if I were confused. In reality, I had expected that exact query. I was just indulging in my penchant for the theatrical.

“Wouldn’t a press release have been a more, well, normal option for this kind of news?”

I laughed and looked her dead in the eye.

“Answer me in all honesty now,” I said carefully. “When is the last time that you actually read a press release? Or for that matter, how many members of the general public would even deign to read something like that?”

A ripple of laughter rolled through the gathered crowd of reporters.

“See, it never happens,” I said. “Never. Why bother with a press release or official statement when you can fake a leak

and get easy PR? Now everyone, the whole world is watching to see what these two companies will do next.”

A murmuring susurrus hissed over the gathered crowd. I was enjoying myself quite a bit at that point.

“In fact,” I said “I think that all of you should be thanking me for handing you a red hot topic to get eyeballs on your webpages and hands on your newspapers.”

I saw a reporter with a plaid jacket raising his hand desperately into the air, trying to get my attention. I admired his enthusiasm and I kind of felt sorry for him, too, so I pointed at him.

“You there, with the, ah, interesting fashion sense.”

Another wave of laughter rolled across the crowd. I was really on a roll. I put my hand over the mic and spoke to Michael as an aside.

“I’ve got them eating out of the palm of my hand. Maybe I should have been a stand-up comedian?”

He frowned, but otherwise offered no comment.

The reporter I’d called on cleared his throat. I guessed that he didn’t feel too bad about my veiled insult of his apparel, because he didn’t seem to be upset.

“I’m confused as to why you didn’t keep this a secret? Aren’t you worried about your competitors? Now they know what your plans are and they can act accordingly.”

“Secrecy and subterfuge are the tools of those who lack confidence,” I said with a smile. “We want to project confidence to our shareholders so they know that this is the

most exciting thing to happen in the world of sporting goods in, well, ever.”

I called on another reporter.

“Why didn’t Evan Jones deal with this matter personally? Does he not have confidence in the deal?”

Now there was a question I hadn’t been counting on. As a woman in the world of high-stakes finance, I knew well how much of a ‘good old boy’ network was really at play. Misogyny ran rampant in that sector, so I should have been expecting such a query. Alas, I had not.

Before I could answer, Michael put his hand on my back and stepped up to the microphone. It was the first time he’d touched me in years, since that fateful day in the boardroom when he’d fired me and broke up with me on the same afternoon.

His fingertips lit up rippling fires which surged through my skin, spreading like a disease to infect the rest of my body. My mouth parted slightly, and my eyes half closed. I struggled to take deeper breaths, because suddenly I felt like panting.

I hated and loved that he could still make me feel that way. The hate part seemed fairly self-evident. It meant that he still could exert some form of control over me, whether I let it affect my judgment or not. He could still make me feel that way. That... good.

The flip side of that coin? I loved the way he made me feel. I had forgotten how good his touch was. I never could figure out why he had such a sway on me, but I adored the way he

used to make love to me. It was like I was the only woman in the entire world.

I never said the obvious out loud to him back then. That he could do better. I wasn't knocking myself, but a man like him could have literally any woman in the world he wanted. Any supermodel, any Oscar-winning actress, any heiress or sports star or musician. Yet he had chosen to spend his time with me. He had chosen to make love to me.

That touch was wonderful, and yet it proved to be its own form of hell. His touch reminded me of what I'd been missing for so long. I was so busy with work and my son that I rarely had a chance to date.

And it never seemed to go anywhere, either. Was I secretly holding out on myself? Sabotaging the dates I did get to go on in hopes that someday Michael would come back into my life? Or were the men I dated just a bunch of jerks?

I thought back to my last date at the Italian restaurant Michael owned. Maybe it was more of the latter, but still it was frustrating.

I didn't know what else to do but stand there while he leaned in close to speak into the microphone. His hand remained on my back, and his torso brushed against my own with the movement. I hadn't been so very close to him in a long time. His familiar smell washed over me and I felt a tingle pass through my body, the epicenter in my core.

"I'm afraid that it's all my fault."

The press fell into a hushed silence. I looked over at Michael, mind reeling with confusion. Why would he say that?

“The truth is,” Michael said in an apologetic tone. “Evan Jones is an all right and swell guy... in small doses.”

Laughter rippled up, louder than the laughter I had engendered from the same crowd. I didn’t have that powerful magnetism that Michael wielded like a whip, getting people to toe the line without even realizing that’s what he was doing.

“And besides,” he said, turning his piercing gaze on me. It could have melted steel. “I prefer to deal with attractive young women instead of grumpy billionaires like, well, like me.”

Mic. Drop. Not literally, but damn, what a maestro. Not only had he taken command of the press corps like a champion, but he’d ensnared me in his mesmerism as well. Let’s just say that Michael wasn’t the only thing about to drop.

He leaned away and assumed an upright posture again, but his hand remained on my back. I tried and failed not to let it distract me as I spoke into the microphone again.

“Now, I’m sure that some of you have noticed that there have been hard-working Mercury hotel staff bringing in tables and refreshments, and yes, that *is* a DJ stand over in the corner.”

Their collective gazes went over to the corner.

“Instead of a boring old press conference, we wanted to do something special. Because the merger between NonPoint and Leisure Unlimited—”

Gotta drop those corporate brand names.

“—isn’t just another billion-dollar business deal for Michael Wallace and Evan Jones, it’s a cause for celebration. And

what better way to celebrate than by having a party? A party that starts... right now!"

Chapter Nine

Jenna

Sometimes you just have to indulge yourself. As the reporters cleared way and the convention hall turned into an impromptu dance hall, I turned toward the DJ booth. A headset-wearing nineteen-year-old with blue-gelled hair and wearing what looked to me like bright orange pajamas had taken up position at his station.

“Yo, DJ,” I said into the microphone. “Kick some tunes.”

I’d always wanted to say that. It might have been pure cringe, but I had always wanted to say it.

It didn’t matter anyway. Hardly anyone noticed because they were busy scrambling out of the way or making a beeline for the buffet tables. Mom always said that putting food out was the most effective way of winning people over. The way to the heart of not just a man, but anyone is through their stomach.

The atmosphere proved more jovial than I would have expected given the crowd. Let’s face it, when you think of people who party hard it’s not the type of journalists who cover the financial sector. By its very nature our business tends to be less glamorous than other, more interesting and glitzy distractions.

So these were ostensibly serious reporters engaged in the not-so-serious business of dancing their asses off and stuffing

themselves with crab cakes and liver pate. I was never a fan of the latter, but then again the food was not meant for me anyway.

I was more than satisfied just feasting my eyes on a job well done. I had executed the press conference on very short notice, and managed to arrange it so that everything was timed perfectly.

Best of all, Michael was looking at me in a whole new light. His normally ice-blue eyes smoldered like a newborn star, threatening to melt me into a puddle. That hadn't changed. But now there was something else in his gaze beyond desire.

There was respect there, too. If not for me, at least for what I had accomplished.

He leaned in close, and my pulse quickened exponentially the closer he came. His soft lips brushed my ear as he whispered in a velvety tone.

“How did you get this arranged so quickly?”

A shiver ran down my spine. My mouth had suddenly gone dry.

“What do you think I was doing on the limo ride?” I said in a breathless, husky whisper. I don't know why we were whispering. Between the DJ booth and the constant hum of conversation it would have been impossible to hear what we were saying.

I suppose, maybe we just wanted an excuse to lean into each other.

“Don't look now,” he said, pointing across the room with his big hand. I'd forgotten how imposing he truly was. It used to

make me feel safe. I longed for that safety again, but it was in the past. Mom always said that once things were over, they could never be that way again.

Maybe that had something to do with why I never told Michael he had a son. I didn't want to risk rekindling a romance that was dead on the vine from the start. Nothing could ever match the exhilaration of those early days when I thought I meant something more to him than just an office fling.

Or could it?

That was my conundrum. Working in the world of high-stakes corporate empires teaches you a thing or two. I knew that when there was high risk, there could also be high reward. I knew that things between us would never really be the same, but that didn't mean that whatever resulted from a renewed romance would be necessarily bad.

Or necessarily good.

I reeled on the inside but I did my best to hide it from Michael and the rest of the world. I had called the tune, and now it was time to pay the piper. Through hook and by crook, I'd pulled off my scheme to the last crossed T and dotted I. Now I had to deal with the consequences of that.

Namely, a lot of flesh pressing and talking to people I barely or didn't know.

"What a turnout," Michael said when I had a spare moment. I hadn't even stepped away from the podium at that point. A lot of people wanted to get a statement from me directly. My throat had gone a little hoarse from all of the talking.

“I know, right?” I coughed slightly and held my throat. “Can I be honest with you for a second, Michael?”

He turned his gaze on me, a penetrating stare that seemed to bare me to the soul. It was as if he knew too much about me and not enough all at once.

Michael put his hand on my shoulder and leaned in close, putting his mouth close to my ear to be heard above the din.

“Always. I want you to always be honest with me, Jenna.”

“Are you sure? Everyone says that, but they often don’t mean it.”

“Am I a man often given to saying things I do not mean?”

I snorted, and took a step back, pulling away from his hand. He was having that shivery effect on me and I didn’t want to let him off the hook too easy.

“You strung me along, didn’t you?”

“I don’t recall ever discussing our sweet, sweet time together as anything more than what it was. Refresh my memory if I’m wrong. We never had ‘the talk,’ did we? That meant either of us was free to end it, no strings attached.”

I knew that some of what had happened was because of my own rose-colored view of our affair. He was right, in that we had never had that conversation where we looked at each other and asked ‘what are we?’ We never talked about what we had or where it was going. I thought it would go on forever, and obviously I had invested more emotionally than he had.

On the other hand, he hadn't thought to mention to me my work was subpar, either.

"Whatever," I said with a growl. "I really don't want to talk about this right now. I need your help to work the crowd."

I brushed imaginary specks of dirt off his suit, getting very close to him to do so. He smelled as nice as I remembered.

"There we are," I said, tidying up his necktie as well. "Now show those pearly whites and make everyone feel good."

"This is too tight," he said as I cinched his tie.

"Suffer for fashion, Michael."

He laughed but as soon as I let go he loosened it some. It was still a nice, tidy knot. I was rather proud of myself.

Michael stopped at the bar on our way to mingle and ordered a gin and tonic and some foreign drink I didn't quite catch the name of. He turned around and presented me with a small wine glass filled with amber fluid and what looked like flecks of metal.

"What in the hell is this?" I asked, swirling around the slightly viscous fluid.

"Goldschläger," Michael said. "It will sooth and lubricate your throat, and make it feel better. You're a little hoarse."

"Bullshit, you're just trying to get me liquored up."

"It's not terribly potent."

I took it like a shot, and then savored the somewhat spicy-sweet flavor. Whatever was in it, my throat did feel as if I'd taken a shot of throat spray. Plus I had a pleasant warmth in my belly, though I was far from drunk or even buzzed.

“Thank you,” I said, setting the empty glass on the bar. “That helped.”

He nodded.

“I’ve given enough press conferences to know your throat can get tired in a hurry.”

It downright made me nervous the way that he was being so thoughtful. It was as if I cringed the whole time waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Eventually, though, I relaxed and just tried to enjoy myself. Michael played his role to perfection, but to my surprise most of the people wanted to talk to me. I guessed it was because I had literally come out of nowhere. Unlike Evan or Michael, I was not well-known to the financial sector because I worked behind the scenes for the company.

Apparently, that had changed.

The night wore on, and I started to grow weary of all the tumult. Parties are great unless you’re the one hosting them.

At one point, I’m not sure when, but the party was in full swing, Michael took my arm and gently pulled me aside into a small adjacent room to the conference hall. It looked to be a modest meeting room, decorated nice enough but with room only for a dozen people or so.

He pushed the door without thinking about it, and it didn’t quite shut all the way. Sounds of the party still filtered in through the crack.

“Here,” Michael said, guiding me to a rolling chair. I settled into it and found that the Mercury hotel did not skimp on their furniture budget. It felt solid but the leather upholstery

cupped my body and supported it well. I made a mental note to check what brand it was.

“Drink this,” he said, pushing a glass of something cold into my hand.

“What is it?”

“Just ice water. You know, you made the right call today. Pretending to cause the leak and putting a spin on the whole thing. Well done.”

I was glad of the praise, but the cold way he delivered it kind of took some of the pleasure out of hearing it.

“Not bad for a glorified secretary, eh?” I asked with a chuckle as his fingers reached down and caressed my neck. “What are you doing—oooh, never mind, don’t stop.”

Michael was a large man who kept himself in top-notch shape. His hands were powerful indeed, and he utilized that strength to give some of the best neck massages in the world. Today was no exception. His fingers worked their magic, soothing every knot of tension he could find into limp submission.

“I’d forgotten how good you are with your hands,” I said. I don’t know why I said it, but I did.

“Some things are to be delegated, and some things are better taken care of... hands-on.”

He slid his hand up my neck, fingers like velvet cat’s paws, until he cradled my chin in his hand. Gently yet firmly. Our eyes met. My pulse pounded in my ears like the rumble of war drums. I could see his desire dancing in his eyes, just as I am sure he could see the same in my own gaze.

Michael kissed me, softly at first. His lips smacked into my own like the landing of a butterfly. I opened my mouth and kissed him back. His tongue wormed its way into my mouth, and I lashed my own against it.

The door stood partly open. Literally anyone might happen by at any moment, but I didn't want him to stop.

His hand slid down to my blouse. Michael's nimble fingers undid the top button, then glided beneath the silken fabric. I moaned as he fondled my breast, moving fingers under my bra cup.

He kissed me hard, taking charge just like he used to. Michael let go of my breasts and gently rubbed my pussy through the thin wall of my panties. The skirt I wore had ridden up to mid-thigh, making the task easy. Now I regretted wearing my silken bloomer 'granny panties' but if he cared, he didn't make any mention.

Michael stopped kissing me, pulling away from me. I chased after him, trying to continue to feel his lips on my own but he held me pinned to the chair with the hand between my legs.

"You know, Jenna," he said, crouching down in front of me, eyes locked on my panty-clad pussy. "If we're all about being honest with each other, I must admit that I miss the smell of your body."

I cried out, sharply, as a wave of contractions traveled through me. He ran his fingers through the groove between my swollen outer labia, occasionally brushing his thumb on my clit at the end of a stroke.

“You know what I loved even more than that?” he rasped, his voice thick with desire.

I couldn't reply. All I could do was gasp, pant, and moan. He really was good with his hands. Once at the opera, during the crescendo of Barber, he used his fingers to make me cum so hard he had to pay for the chair I'd been sitting in. He told them I spilled wine on it, but I think we all knew the truth.

“I loved the taste of your sweet pussy.”

He shoved his head between my thighs, spreading them wider. I cried out, my hands instinctively going to his thick head of hair. I detected a couple more gray strands than before, but other than that it was still the same luxurious mane I knew.

Michael pulled my panties to the side and then darted his tongue through my throbbing pussy. I moaned deep and low, leaning forward in the chair as my body pressed itself desperately against him.

Michael suckled on my pussy lip, swallowing my juices greedily and with great enthusiasm. His low growls and grunts were almost enough to push me over the edge all by themselves.

He pulled his head back, stretching my labia out until it popped free with a wet sound. Michael dove right back in and this time gave the opposite side the same treatment. I was so close. If he would just lick my clitoris I would cum so hard...

Michael moved up and gently kissed my clit. I cried out, shoved almost over the line, but not quite there.

Then he pursed his lips and enveloped my clit inside their warm embrace. Michael suckled, varying both speed and intensity.

I sucked in a ragged gasp of air as my body spasmed wildly. For a moment I contorted my face and hovered on a plane of cumming so hard that it was almost scary.

Then I let the air out in a sharp, piercing scream. I poured all the ecstasy I felt into that holler and my body experienced the most profound release of my life. The door was wide open, it was hard to imagine that no one had heard us yet.

Michael clamped his hand over my mouth and I screamed into his palm. I squirmed about, eyes squeezing shut as pulse after electric pulse raced through my body.

He lifted his face from my crotch, face dripping with my juices. Michael got to his feet and unzipped his fly. I shivered from the aftershocks of my climaxes, just a helpless ball of putty in his hands.

Only he didn't use his hands this time. I gasped as he pressed the head of his cock against my wide-open pussy. He growled, locking his eyes with my own and then slid inside of me.

"Don't close your eyes," he said. "I want to see the look on your face when I go all the way in."

He glided in gently, filling me inch by inch. I gasped, clutching at him as I lifted and spread my legs to allow him easier ingress to my pussy. He slid in all the way, and I couldn't help it, I closed my eyes at the sharp pinch that came from full penetration.

The pinch metamorphosed into a delightful wave of pleasant, fulfilled sensations. Not enough to make me cum again, but enough to pack me a lunch and send me off on the road to one.

Then he thrust into me, slamming the back of the chair into the meeting room table. A deep, guttural groan escaped my throat. It felt so damn good to have Michael inside of me again.

I cried out another orgasm into his hand, and slowly melted off of the chair and into his arms. We wound up sitting on the floor, me on his lap, his back against the heavy water cooler.

It was hard to reckon the cruel, ice-cold billionaire with the tenderness he was showing me now. There were no barriers between us in that instant, and it was wonderful.

“Jenna, I...”

His voice carried a note to it I had never heard before, something so foreign coming out of his mouth that I couldn’t place it. Was it... regret?

“What?” I prompted when he lapsed into silence.

“Maybe... maybe I shouldn’t have fired you.”

Chapter Ten

Michael

I strode through the doors of my main office building, my body brimming with energy. I tried to force what had happened between Jenna and I to the back of my mind, but it was easier said than done.

I stalked across the lobby like a wolf on the prowl. A couple of execs looked up from their phones as I passed, their staring eyes full of fear and mouths gaping open. I was preparing for a meeting with a man who was just as stubborn as I was.

I knew what was going to happen when I got to the meeting. I prepared myself for the coming verbal duel as my secretary informed me that Evan was already waiting for me in my office.

Evan stood behind my desk, the glass surface littered with different devices, printouts, and reports. Behind him, the city skyline shone in the violet hour of dusk. It was a lovely view, too bad his angry scowl ruined it.

“What the hell happened, Michael?”

I bristled at both his tone and accusatory stare. I'd been in many heated discussions inside of board rooms before. Nothing ever got violent, but there were many times when voices were raised and relationships broke forever.

Usually, I was the implacable rock upon which everything and everyone broke. I wore down my opponents through

sheer force of will. But on this day, my foe was no ordinary man. He was as rich and as powerful as I was. There would be no easy backing down.

Sometimes in the wild when two alpha males of the same species meet each other, and they both know that it would destroy them both to gain a victory, they will decide to work together.

Neither of us would just knuckle under. The energy in the room grew heavier than the thunderstorm rolling through outside.

I could escalate, or I could try to de-escalate. I decided to keep my cool for the time being, but I had to call him out for his behavior. I settled upon a way to do it without acting overtly rude myself, but rather pointing out the discrepancies in his protocol.

I arched my brows at him.

“Oh, hello, Evan. Nice to see you. Pleasant weather we’re having. You have a funny way of greeting your business partners.”

He shook his head curtly. His eyes locked with my own. Though we stood motionless, facing off against one another, an image popped into my head.

An image of two alpha wolves circling on the Alaskan tundra. Hackles up, fur bristling like a porcupine, black lips peeled back to flash fangs white as the bone they can crack with ease. Steam hissing from black velvet noses, chuffing the frigid air. Would the snow be stained with red today?

In the financial world, the color red is associated with loss. I've fired people for loss before, and I will do so again. Somehow, the connection in my mind caused me to remember where I was, and what we were doing there.

Trying to make money, not lose it. No red. Just black, numbers checked in the positive column from top to bottom.

"Evan, you're going to have to say something to let me know what you're thinking. I did not, in point of fact, spontaneously develop telepathy last night."

He snorted.

"Cute. You've been reading up on a website on how to be wittier, I see. You really want to pretend you don't know what I'm upset about?"

I shook my head and forced myself back into my present circumstance.

"I can't fathom what you're *this* upset about."

His lips twitched into a snarl. Again I was reminded of the snapping maws of lupine origin.

"Don't give me that. You know exactly what I'm talking about. I thought the plan was to keep the merger between NonPoint and Leisure Unlimited a secret until the last minute?"

"Yes, that is the way that we had planned it initially."

"You're damn right that's the way we planned it initially." His nostrils flared as he faced off with me, knuckles on top of his desk, looking like a silverback gorilla.

“So tell me, Michael, what happened to the plan we came up with in the first place? Huh? What was with the big reveal?”

He straightened up his posture and tossed his hands into the air, letting go of some of his tension.

“And then, just to put the icing on the freaking cake, as if it hadn’t already been broadcast to everybody and their fucking brother, I turn on the news and find out that there’s going to be... a press conference?”

Evan turned around and walked toward the window looking out on the city.

“A press conference!” He ran his hand down over his face and then shook his mane of hair. “A press conference. This is how you panic investors. This is how you lead to a fire sale sell-off of people who have spent decades investing in our respective brands.”

“Yes, you’re right,” I said. “That’s Business Management 101 right there. Only this time, I think that things turned out better than keeping it a secret. I mean, a press conference is a perfectly respectable way to disperse this type of information.”

He scoffed.

“Do forgive the incredulity, but I don’t think you and I have the same definition of respectable. Respectable would have been a string quartet or something. Not electronic dancing disco shit the kids are listening to, and a huge party hosted by DJ PhreshManx who I am told is all the rage on that TikTok bullshit the zoomers love? It was like you were trying to do the exact opposite of what we had planned, and draw as much

attention to the merger as is humanely possible. And I must say, if that was your goal, you exceeded my expectations and then some.”

“You see, this is exactly the reason why I said it should have been me and you taking the lead on this from the get-go.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“I told you that we can’t rely on common people. This whole fiasco you’re ranting and raving about? It was all Jenna’s doing. I literally had nothing to do with it.”

“Nothing to do with it? There’s a picture of you with nearly every reporter and journalist who covers the financial sector.”

“Don’t argue semantics with me. It was Jenna’s fault.”

His gaze darkened along with the night sky outside the window.

“Jenna has been my right hand and trusted confidante for years now. I trust her more than you, because quite frankly she’s more competent than you.”

I scoffed at that but otherwise did not interrupt.

“Maybe it was your team that caused that leak, Michael. Why don’t you swing that judgmental pendulum back in your own direction?”

“Are you questioning my competence?” I snapped.

Our gazes locked in a battle of wills. Neither of us wanted to give even an inch of ground to the other. Eventually, Evan backed down, dropping his gaze away first.

“This is bullshit,” he said. “We need to think about this logically.”

“Logically?” I tilted my head to the side. “What do you mean we have to think about this logically?”

He gave me a scowl.

“I mean just what I say I mean. We need to think about this logically—look, obviously we both need to admit that Jenna saved the situation and turned it around. How can you say it’s all her fault?”

“Because I didn’t leak it to the press. And I know that you wouldn’t, but Jenna is not like us. She couldn’t keep her team in check and someone told the press.”

“I trust Jenna implicitly. I told Jenna to take the position of team lead on this precisely because she’s so hard-working, creative, and brilliant. She would be a marvelous chess player because she thinks four or five steps ahead of everyone else and the way she turned this around proves it.”

I nodded, feeling a growing respect for Jenna.

“She did indeed handle what could have been a crisis or a disaster with an aplomb that belies her years.”

“You got all poetic sounding there, Michael.”

“Oh bullshit. I’m trying to be nice.”

Evan gave me a long look.

“What?” I prompted when he didn’t say anything but kept staring.

“I think that you respect her a lot more than you are willing to let on.”

I wasn't sure I could deny that and be truthful. I had been feeling an increasing amount of respect for Jenna. She had truly grown a lot in the five years since we had last seen each other.

My mind drifted back to the press conference. Jenna had handled everything with grace and intelligence and acumen. I had been surprised. Surprised and delighted to be honest.

Ever since she had walked into Evan's office, I burned for her. The respect I felt for her only made me want her even more. I guess that was why I had to have sex with her, right then, right there.

And the sex had been magnificent, much better than it ever had been before. I realized that the reason was I respected Jenna more, and making love to a woman I respected was somehow better.

"At the end of the day," I said, recovering my senses somewhat. "There's no point in dwelling on the past. What's done is done, and the cat is out of the bag regarding the NonPoint and Leisure Unlimited merger."

He nodded and spread his hands out wide.

"What can you do? It is what it is, and I think that it will probably turn out to our advantage. Did you see how many reporters were at that press conference? I always knew Jenna was a master of networking and her work ethic was incredible, but that impressed me a great deal."

"Me too," I said, nodding and glad that on one thing, at least, the two of us could agree.

“Well,” Evan said, turning around and stretching his back. “Since everyone and their brother knows about the merger now, there’s no point in holding anything back any longer is there?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean, we might as well share everything with the teams, including the things we haven’t told them about this merger yet.”

“Oh,” I said, with sudden understanding. “Yes, maybe you’re right. Maybe it is time.”

I knew what he meant. There was one last batch of secret documents we had been holding back from our teams. Now, Evan wanted to share them with the teams. Share them with Jenna, by proxy.

My reluctance was mostly feigned. Inside, I felt a swell of excitement at the thought of working with Jenna again. Such a heady rush of emotion shocked me to my core. I didn’t normally feel that way, for anyone or any reason.

I got up and went to the huge watercolor painting of lilies on a verdant pond. There was a group of ducks on the pond, but if you looked closely there was a fox lurking in the reeds. A lot of the time, I imagined I was the fox.

I pulled the painting outward and it swung on a mechanical armature, revealing a hidden wall safe. I placed my finger on the scanner to get my prints recorded, and then punched in the security code.

The safe popped open without a sound and swung out with ghostly quiet. I reached inside to retrieve the rest of the

documents.

Only to find the safe was empty.

Chapter Eleven

Jenna

“What do you mean, stolen?”

My voice echoed loudly off the walls of Michael’s office. Michael’s team sat across from my own, and all of them sort of looked shocked. Even more shocked than they had when the news of the merger were leaked to the press.

Michael’s expression remained as stony as a gargoyle hanging from the side of a church in gothic Europe. When he spoke, he could have been talking about the daily specials at the local diner rather than an act of corporate espionage. His tone was that calm.

“There was a set of documents stolen from my office. Currently we don’t have any clue about who may have perpetrated this act, but that’s a concern for the police, not this team. Our business is the merger.”

He tossed a thick file folder onto the glossy table. It landed with a perfunctory thud. The file seemed to be heavier than it actually was.

“What’s that?” Trent asked, squinting his eyes at the folder.

“That is as much of what had been contained in the stolen file as Evan Jones could supply from his end. It’s much thinner than the files which were stolen. It will be up to us to recompile all of the missing documents and restore what we have lost.”

“Is that even possible?” Joestar asked, stroking his graying beard.

“We will have to make it possible,” Chad said firmly, then looked up at Michael like a dog seeking praise for being a good boy. Michael ignored him as far as I could tell, and Chad soon dropped his gaze back to the table.

“We are in crisis management mode now,” Michael said. “The best we can do is minimize the damage caused by this theft.”

Joestar heaved a long sigh and shook his head.

“I just don’t understand.” His wizened face crinkled into a look of confusion. “I mean, how could this happen? Don’t you have security? And I would imagine the combination to your safe isn’t one, two, three, four, five or anything ridiculous like that?”

My lips twisted into a tight grimace. The way I remembered it, Michael didn’t trust anyone. DTA he used to say by way of abbreviation. Don’t Trust Anyone.

Michael was so paranoid about not trusting anyone but himself that he never wanted to allow cameras or recording devices, or remote-controlled locks anywhere. The only way to access things was in person. Meaning that there are no recordings of the person who cracked the safe.

One of the things we’d never seen eye to eye on in the past was this core belief of his that he couldn’t trust anyone. It sure looked as if he had not changed a bit in the last five years.

And yet, when we had sex, things had felt different. He seemed more engaged, more... intimate. I couldn't reconcile the dichotomy of how tender he could be when making love with how ruthless and cold-blooded he was the rest of the time.

"I'm sorry, Joe," I said, catching Joestar's attention... and coming to Michael's rescue. "With all respect, Michael's security protocols are none of our concern."

Joestar's lips formed an inverted U as he digested my words. I decided to forge on to hopefully put the nail in the coffin of this particular subject.

"Besides, Michael is right. Our concern isn't who stole the documents or even why they stole them. Our concern is to rebuild the document file piece by piece. That's how we manage this situation, and that's how we control the damage and fallout from it."

Michael's eyes darted over to me. His look was sharp, inscrutable. In other words, typical of Michael in a boardroom. Even though I was better at reading him than most people, he still remained an enigma. If he felt any gratitude for my coming to his rescue, he was hiding it very, very well.

"Jenna is correct." Michael's voice contained none of its usual aggression or smugness, and yet he still defied anyone to argue with him by sheer presence alone. He was ostensibly speaking to the entire boardroom, yet his blue eyes remained locked on me.

"It's time for us to look forward, instead of dwelling on the past."

I did my best not to flinch, or give any sign of the shiver that ran down my spine. All of a sudden I felt a shock traveling through my body. Was Michael just talking about this case? Or was he talking about us?

Did he regret what happened between us? He'd said that maybe he shouldn't have fired me. Michael admitting a mistake was one of those once-in-a-lifetime things. Even if he did make one, he wasn't likely to admit it. You might even say that Michael was as likely to admit to a mistake as a snowball was to form on the sun.

I couldn't help myself. He impressed me.

Only now I had to say something that was going to make the whole room a lot less comfortable. Comfortable? Hah. It had been as comfortable as a bed of nails from the start and now it was about to get worse. Much worse.

I cast my gaze over the three members of Michael's team. Chad returned my gaze with something like a challenge, as if daring me to say something to him so he could retort and assert dominance. Trent kind of half smiled like maybe he thought he was going to ask me to drinks after the meeting, and Blake tried to imitate everything Michael did, as always.

None of them took me seriously for my business acumen. None of them considered me a threat. I figured that would be an advantage.

“This theft proves that the individual or individuals trying to sabotage the merger between NonPoint and Leisure Unlimited is on your team. My team is, simply put, blameless.”

Silence reigned for a long moment. Then Chad laughed mockingly and looked over at Michael.

“Are you listening to this?” he turned a glare my way. “I’m sorry, but I don’t see how you can level an accusation like that at us. Given the stock options involved, the three of us stand to make a small fortune in the merger just for being in this boardroom. Why would we risk that by trying to sabotage it?”

“I’m not at a stage where I can speculate on motivation,” I said coolly, returning his gaze without wavering. He only thought he was like Michael Wallace. Hah. He wanted to be like Michael Wallace. But he was so far off the mark he might as well have been trying to be Michael Myers.

“I can say that there had to be opportunity for this theft.” I gestured at my team members. “None of my team members had access to this building. They get in for our meetings because we gather in the parking garage and use my security pass.”

“Well, *you* still have access,” Blake said in a ‘gotcha’ tone of voice.

“Yes, but the theft had to occur in a particular time period, when no one was on this floor. During that particular stretch of time, my movements were all accounted for. In short, I have a digital alibi in the form of my phone. It wasn’t me, and it wasn’t Michael, so that leaves the three other people in this room with security access to this building.”

Michael cleared his throat, and his three team members all turned their whiter-than-sour-cream faces toward him as if he

were their savior. I think they believed he was about to put me in my place.

“I was wrong,” Michael said.

The three members of his team deflated like balloons on a porcupine farm. Their savior had just floored them by taking accountability.

They weren't the only ones floored, either. Michael never took accountability for anything, and yet here he was doing just that twice in one day. Twice in one hour.

Maybe Satan was ice skating to work because hell had truly frozen over.

“I'm not convinced the saboteur is in this room,” he said. “But she's right. Her team is definitely not behind this and neither is she. It has to be someone on my payroll. And everyone is a suspect.”

The three of them shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

“Now,” I said, clearing my throat, “that we have, once again, dealt with this matter to the best of our ability at this juncture, let's return our attention to what we can do to rectify it. Namely, my team needs to look through the documents that Evan provided and then ‘fill in the holes’ as it were.”

“How long do you expect that to take?”

“I think that between the four of us we can have it sometime later this evening, tomorrow morning at the latest.” I looked over at my team. “Anybody object to an all-nighter if need be?”

Joestar grinned.

“I kind of miss all-nighters. The bad take-out food, the endless pots of coffee, the slap-happy discussions of Samuel L. Jackson films. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“All right. It sounds to me like we have a plan of action. Let’s adjourn this meeting for now, and pick up once we’ve all received the report.”

Everyone packed up their things and headed for the door, me included. I told Joestar he was in charge of the meeting until I arrived. I needed to figure out what to do with my kid so I could make this work. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d worked on a project with Damon asleep in my lap.

As I headed for the door, Michael spoke.

“Jenna, I want you to stay for a bit.”

A shiver ran down my spine, but I tamped it down and tried to keep my voice level when I turned around to speak. His eyes smoldered like a supernova, melting my knees into slurry.

“You mean you wanted to ask me to stay,” I said firmly as I could.

“I mean what I said.”

His eyes traveled up my body, and I suddenly felt vulnerable under his gaze. I wore a simple black pencil skirt with a charcoal blazer over an ivory cami top. Not the most revealing outfit in the world, yet it seemed like I might as well have worn nothing at all.

Michael’s gaze spoke volumes. It didn’t just tell me he knew what I looked like naked. It said he was intimately familiar with my body, and knew just how to make me twist and

writhe like a puppet on his strings. I remembered the old days when I used to help him ‘come down’ after a meeting. Come indeed.

The door to the meeting room clicked shut. Now we were alone.

“I know there’s a mole on my side.”

I flinched, and took a step toward him.

“And do you have any idea of who it could be?”

“That’s a complicated query to answer,” he said, eyes darting toward the door. “The main thing we need to remember is that we need to be extra careful sharing any kind of information. Now, how much you want to trust your underlings is up to you.”

His eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

“But as for my team, there is only one member who I trust and you’re looking at him. I don’t want to discuss the report in front of my team. I want to do it somewhere more private, just you and I.”

My heart skipped a beat and I struggled to swallow the lump in my throat.

“Okay. Did you have any place in mind for this private, ah, debriefing?”

“I was thinking my penthouse would be a good fit.”

His voice was a rich velvet whisper, seducing my mind with timbre and pitch as much as the carnivorous look in his eyes. I wanted to give in, I really did. I remembered the great sex we’d had at the convention hall. It came to me in flashes of

sensation. The smell of his cologne mixed with sweat, the warmth of his mouth on my body, the way he heaved into me while sating his desire...

I had to resist.

“I don’t know that now is the best time to mix business with pleasure,” I said, proud of myself for keeping my voice steady.

Disappointment flashed in his gaze, but he hid it well for the most part.

“Very well, then perhaps we can meet at my restaurant?”

“I think you own a couple hundred restaurants, Michael. You’re going to have to be more specific.”

My tone was cheeky and sarcastic, but he played right along.

“I only own about sixty restaurants in the United States, don’t be ridiculous. And I think you know the one, don’t you?”

Viviani’s. The place where I’d had the awful date with... what the hell was his name? Ted or something? I couldn’t even remember. I just remembered that he’d been a big jerk and Michael had stepped in to kick the guy to the curb.

Now he wanted to go there.

“Oh, so you *did* recognize me, then?” I snapped. “You looked at me like I was a total stranger, you know.”

All the pain of that moment washed over me and came out in my voice. My heart thudded as much from anger as the effect Michael had on me.

“I didn’t recognize you at first,” he said, sighing. “I’m sorry for that, but I did not recognize you. It had been so long...”

He took a step forward and put a hand on my shoulder.

“But I wish I had, Jenna.”

I gasped in spite of myself, my eyes almost closing but not quite. I watched him through my lashes as his handsome face contorted with regret.

“I wish I had recognized you, Jenna. Believe me when I say that.”

My phone rang, and I wanted to ignore it. It was the standard ring tone and I had assigned a specific tone to all of my contacts, which numbered into three figures. This was the ‘spam’ or unknown number tone.

But when you’re a mother, you don’t get the luxury of ignoring a call like that. Because you just never knew. I just know that as soon as I heard the ring I knew there was trouble.

I answered it, my voice shaking.

“Hello?”

“Hello?” it was an older female voice. “Is this Jenna Malone?”

“That’s me,” I said.

“This is St. Andrew’s Hospital. I’m afraid your mother and son are here.”

Chapter Twelve

Jenna

“We’re thirty seconds out.”

Funny how time seems to lose all meaning in moments of crisis. I mean, sure, time has always seemed mutable and prone to change from the human perspective. The old adage ‘time flies when you’re having fun.’ If that concept exists, then there must be an equal and opposite force to balance it out.

Hence Einstein’s quote ‘when you’re courting a pretty girl an hour seems like a second, and if you’re sitting on a hot coal a second seems like an hour.’ I’m not sure what courting is but I’m pretty sure it’s something you get a restraining order for nowadays.

I do know that the second bit is quite true. Even thirty seconds of travel to the hospital seemed an interminably long time. My mind flashed back to the last five minutes. The moment of sheer panic when I realized that I was getting *that* call. The call that keeps parents up at night, the call that says what could have gone wrong did go wrong.

You never realize it’s the worst moment of your life until it’s too late. I thought I knew what the worst moment was. That moment in the boardroom when Michael told me it was over. Both us, and my employment.

Now I felt as if that was just a sucker punch to set me up for the knockout blow. Surprise, the worst moment of your life wasn't getting dumped and fired by a man who'd gotten you pregnant. No, the worst moment is this, when you find out that your family, the entire foundation of your existence, is in danger.

The thought that I could lose everything paralyzed me for a moment. Michael pried the phone out of my hands and helped me to the express elevator. Michael had his Italian supercar, a candy red space ship looking vehicle that he assured me was fast and nimble enough to get us to the hospital quickly.

I didn't mind that he was speeding. If anything, I felt like I wanted him to go faster. The lights of the city flashed by, illuminating our features for a moment before the next shadow plunged us into darkness.

Michael's expression was both of concentration and grim sympathy. The lights from his fancy dashboard cast an unearthly pallor to his handsome face. He seemed less human in that moment and more like some sort of action hero.

The supercar hugged the road, zig-zagging through traffic and getting us to the hospital in about thirty seconds. The GPS said five minutes, so I don't know if it was the car, his driving, or sheer luck that got us there so quickly.

He screeched to a halt in a spot with red lines boldly declaring it to be 'ambulance only' but that didn't stop Michael.

"I don't think we can park here," I said.

“It’ll be fine,” Michael said, getting out of the car.

“Michael, they’re going to tow you if you leave it here.”

A man in a blue and gray security guard uniform sauntered over to us. The look on his face seemed to suggest both envy and eagerness. He envied Michael for the supercar, and he was eager to take out his frustrations on us by exerting the tiny bit of authority society afforded to him.

“You can’t park here, sir,” the guard said in a nasal voice.

“Ambulance only.”

“Here,” Michael said, handing the security guard his keys.

“Park her for me, will you?”

The guard looked at the keys in his hand, and then back at Michael.

“Are you crazy, man?”

“I’m not crazy.” Michael stared at the hospital’s west wing.

“The new cardiac center looks nice.”

“Yeah, it is nice, and you’re going to have to park your own car. I’m not a valet, I’m a security guard.”

Michael took out his wallet and counted out more than a dozen crisp one-hundred dollar bills.

“You see, you are going to park my car for me for two reasons. Number one, I’m giving you fifteen hundred dollars cash to do so. Number two, the new cardiac center is called the Michael Wallace Cardiac Surgery Center.”

The security guard paled.

“You’re... you’re the rich guy who threw us the Christmas party, with the light-up bar and everything.”

“Yup. I’m that guy. Park her somewhere close for me, will you, son?”

Michael stuffed the man’s pocket with money. All I knew was, the matter was settled and I could safely get out of the car. I wondered how the guard was going to find Michael to give him the keys.

I didn’t care that much, though. I was out of the car and racing into the emergency room entrance. The bay doors slid open at my approach. A harried-looking security guard glanced up at me as I entered, but he didn’t challenge me. I suppose he saw a lot of worried relatives storming into the ER doors and knew the look.

I rushed to the reception desk in the ER, my palm slapping the whistle-clean surface a bit harder than I intended. The nurse behind the desk glanced up with a sour expression.

“I’m here for my son, and my mother,” I blurted. “My son’s only four, his name is Damon.”

“What’s the full name?” the woman asked with detached professionalism.

“Damon Malone,” I said. “His name is Damon.”

She typed on her keyboard for a moment and frowned.

“How do you spell that last name?”

“M-A-L-O-N-E,” I said, probably a lot louder than I needed to. “Damon is his first name.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, looking at her screen and shaking her head. “I don’t see anyone named Damon Malone in our system as a patient.”

“But they called me and said he was here,” I gasped. “Did we come to the wrong hospital?”

Suddenly I felt Michael’s hand on my elbow. He stood behind and a little to the left of me.

“Ma’am,” he said “Is there a record of anyone with the last name Malone as a patient?”

“Just a moment.”

Michael’s presence soothed me enough that I didn’t explode while she looked it up on her computer. A moment later she nodded.

“It looks like Sherry Malone is in a recovery room.”

“That’s my mom! Recovery?” I gaped, panic shooting through me anew. “Did she have a surgery?”

“She had a procedure,” the woman said stiffly.

“What kind of procedure?”

“Ma’am, can you direct us to the recovery room?” Michael interjected himself. The nurse seemed relieved. She told him how to reach the recovery area, and then Michael led the way.

We came into a small lobby with about a dozen padded chairs. I barely noticed the one door and frosted glass reception window, because my son sat on one of the chairs.

“Hi, Mom,” he said, all calm as if nothing were wrong at all. I rushed to him and enveloped him in my arms. Relief flooded through me, tempered by the knowledge that my mother had had some kind of procedure.

“Damon, are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Everybody says I’m really brave. They gave me a lollipop, see?”

“What happened to Gramma?”

His face scrunched up with concentration as he recalled the memory.

“She got really tired, and laid down on the couch for a nap. After a while she asked me to hand her the phone, and then she dialed nine one one, and then I got to ride in the ambulance with her.”

I hugged him tight and tousled his hair.

“You’re a very brave boy.”

A man in a white lab coat came out of the door. I assumed he was the doctor, and I wound up being right. I turned to face him as he approached me.

“Are you the daughter? Jenna Malone?”

“That’s me,” I said, my voice sounding very small in my ears.

“What’s happened to my mother?”

“She had a slight myocardial infarction, is our best guess. Her heart stopped beating with a regular rhythm.”

“Oh no,” I gasped. “Is she going to need a transplant?”

“No, we’re not at that point yet,” the doctor replied. “We were able to use controlled microwave bursts to correct the heart’s contractions, but once this problem starts it tends to get worse over time. I’m afraid the long-term treatment options are rather limited.”

“What brought this on?” I asked. “Is it genetics? Should I be getting myself and my son tested?”

The doctor sighed, and looked down at his chart for a moment. Then he tucked his pen behind his ear and gave me a look that said he was about to be frank.

“To be honest with you, ma’am, I don’t think genetics are to blame here. Your mother’s medical records indicate that she’s never had a history of heart disease. I believe her advanced age is to blame.”

He flipped through a couple of pages in his file folder. Her advanced age? My mom wasn’t that old, was she...?

Then it hit me, that mom had me kind of late, and was in her seventies now. That’s retirement age. Past it even.

“According to her intake at the reception desk, your mother babysits your four-year-old son for upwards of fifty hours per week. That’s a hard schedule for a woman her age to maintain, healthy heart or no.”

I felt my stomach bottom out. I’d done this to my mother. I’d put her in the hospital by foisting my rambunctious son off on her whenever it was convenient for me. All so I could pursue my dreams.

“Is she okay? Can I see her?” I felt a tear slide down my cheek. Damon frowned up at me and held my hand a little bit tighter.

“To answer your first question, her condition is no longer critical but she needs rest, and to be monitored while she gets it. To answer your second question, you can see her for a couple of minutes, not more. In my presence.”

“You go ahead,” Michael said, moving over to sit beside Damon. “Damon and I will finish coloring in this picture of

Superman.”

“It’s Iron Man, they’re totally different,” Damon said.

“Thank you.” I nodded to Michael. I would not forget this moment when he was there for me no questions asked.

I went into my mother’s room. The smell of the place assaulted my senses. It was clean, but it had that intense ‘hospital smell’ to it. My mother’s form lay on the bed, her head lolled to the side, eyes tightly shut.

She looked so small, and so frail, that I started weeping silently. There were devices hooked up to her monitoring her vitals. An IV dripped fluid slowly into her veins. I wasn’t used to seeing my mother like this. She’d always been among the most hale and healthy people I’d known.

Now I felt the crushing weight of guilt come down on my shoulders. I had done this to my mother. Me, and no one else. I had pushed her too far, asked too much. This was the result.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I said, going to her and taking the hand not hooked up to an IV. At least her hand was warm. That was good. Living people were warm.

“I shouldn’t have put all of my problems on you. I’m so sorry for that. Please be okay. Please.”

I sniffled and looked at her sleeping face. She looked older than I remembered. I should have been more aware of it.

“I’d do anything to make this right, Mom. Anything.”

“I’m sorry,” the doctor said. “Your time is up. it’s time to leave.”

Outside, I found that my son and the man he didn't know was actually his father getting along famously. It tugged at my heart to see the two of them together, coloring with crayons and talking excitedly about what they were going to draw next.

They truly looked like a bonafide father and son.

"Wait a second," I said as I walked up to them. "That's not... where did the crayons go?"

"Oh another kid needed them," Damon said. "A sick kid, so I told the nurse they could take them."

"So what are you drawing on then... is that money?"

"Yes, we're giving Benjamin Franklin a mustache and beard." He showed me their handiwork. "Personally I think old Ben looks pretty good with a 'stache."

"Doctor," I said as he joined us. "Are you sure a transplant won't help my mother?"

"I'm afraid that at her age, she will be moved far back on the waiting list. She is not likely to receive one before it's too late. I'm sorry."

My heart sank, and Michael stepped up toward the doctor.

"Is her heart defect something that a biopolymer coronary implant could correct?"

The doctor blinked in surprise, then looked at Michael in a new light.

"Why, yes, but how do you know about that? The technology is only now finishing clinical trials."

He shook his head.

“Not to mention only one company produces the device, and there’s only one clinic where the FDA has approved of the procedure.”

“I know.” Michael grinned. “I own the company, and the clinic. Begin the preparations to move the patient to the clinic immediately.”

“Michael,” I gasped, hugging him tight. “Thank you. Thank you so much for this.”

I finally gave in to full-on, body-wracking sobs. I cried pretty hard onto his shoulder. Damon was sweet, coming up to hug both of our legs at once.

“It’s going to be alright, Jenna.” Michael stroked his hand through my hair soothingly. “It’s going to be alright.”

Chapter Thirteen

Jenna

I'd been to Michael's penthouse a few times before when we were seeing each other. Before he fired me, of course.

This was the first time I'd been there with my son in tow. I had originally feared that it wouldn't be very kid friendly in my long absence. That there would be naked statues or straight-up pornography adorning the walls. You can never tell with bachelors. I shouldn't have been worried. Michael was never that crass.

The penthouse was expansive, taking up most of the top floor. Michael had no less than three different magnificent views, one for the master bedroom, the living room, and the eat-in kitchen.

The penthouse also featured a guest quarters. Notice I didn't say guest room. I said guest quarters with their own living room, bathroom, and kitchen.

Michael had invited us over not for dinner or a playdate with my son. Our purpose was something very solemn.

I sat stiffly erect on the modern black leather sofa, facing the big screen monitor suspended over the living room. My son sat nearby. Damon played with a pair of action figures on the rounded edge of the oval coffee table.

He glanced up over his shoulder at me, eyes unusually troubled.

“Is Gramma out of her surgery yet?” he asked.

“I don’t know, sweetie. The doctor is supposed to let us know when she comes out.”

He nodded, and then pointed one of his action figures at the big monitor.

“And that’s where we’re going to talk to the doctor?”

I nodded, and picked him up to set him on my lap. I could tell he was feeling a little bit in need of comfort.

He leaned against me and briefly sucked his thumb. Sometimes he did that when he was really stressed out. The pediatrician said it was normal, though my mom kept saying she was going to cover his thumbs in hot sauce. I figured that would probably just lead to Damon having a spicy foods addiction later in life.

That’s what had happened to me, after all.

I looked over my shoulder, past the back of the sofa at the eat-in kitchen. Michael stood near the fridge, fingers tapping furiously on his phone. He was texting only and not making phone calls because he was waiting on the doctor. His broad shoulders were tense, rigid, his jaw set hard. Michael was worried about my mother, I could tell.

Michael’s phone rang, and it startled all of us, me maybe the most of all. He put the phone to his ear after the first ring and spoke.

“Hello? Yes, yes, just a moment.”

He ended the call and came into the living room.

“That was Doctor Claremont’s office. We are to expect an imminent Zoom call from him.”

As if on cue, the big screen monitor flashed. Using his phone, Michael accepted the call. A middle-aged man with green scrubs appeared on the screen. I tried to judge from his posture whether or not the surgery had been a success, but he was almost as inscrutable as Michael.

“Well, Doctor?” Michael said. “Don’t keep us in suspense.”

“Sorry, I was waiting to make sure the connection was secure and we could see and hear each other.” The doctor cleared his throat. “The operation was a complete success.”

I collapsed back against the backrest in a slow topple. Damon squirmed off of my lap so he could run around the room in circles, pumping his fist in the air.

I felt the pressure of the last few days melt away. Now that I didn’t have to hold myself together and be stoic for the world, I sort of broke down. I started crying, only a little at first, but I couldn’t stop.

Damon stopped running around the room and came back to the sofa. He climbed up onto the cushion beside me. Damon wrapped his arms around me in a warm hug.

“Why are you crying, Mommy?”

“Because I was scared,” I said, trying to pull myself together.

“I was scared that something would happen to Gramma.”

“I wasn’t” he said simply as if that explained everything. “I knew she was gonna be okay.”

I gave him a long look.

“How did you know that it was going to be okay?”

I half expected him to say an angel told him or something. It turned out I was quite wrong about that.

“Because Michael told me that it would be okay. He promised me.”

“Oh, he did?” I turned to Michael and cocked an eyebrow. He answered with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

Michael turned to the screen and faced Doctor Claremont.

“What’s next in the treatment plan for Mrs. Malone?” he asked.

“Well, she is going to have to remain in our care here at the clinic for at least a week, most likely two. We need to monitor the implant as well as have a team on hand twenty-four-seven to deal with any post-surgical complications that might arise due to her advanced age.”

“How did the surgery itself go?” Michael asked.

The surgeon puffed his chest out a little bit. He’d just been handed a chance to talk about his job.

“I believe that the surgery went very well. There was a bit more bleeding than anticipated due to a higher vascular development in your mother’s endocrine system than expected, but it was easily controlled and the surgery proceeded on schedule...”

He droned on for a good while. From the sound of it, he believed that the surgery was a resounding success. That was good enough for me.

“Her condition is stable,” the doctor continued.

“Can we see Gramma, Mom?” Damon asked.

Michael looked up at the doctor. “How about it, Doc? When can she have visitors again?”

The doctor’s face creased into a worried frown.

“I’m not sure that any visitors are a good idea at this time, at least for a few days. For one thing, she will be on a large amount of painkillers and likely not conscious or lucid for the brief instances that she is.”

“Keep us apprised if that should change,” Michael said.

“Of course. Right now, we would rather avoid contact with her family to avoid possible biological contamination and to lower the patient’s anxiety overall.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

The screen went dark, and Michael immediately got on his phone.

“Steve? Let’s go ahead and inform the marketing department that the implant was a success. Yes, we can use this as part of our marketing, but keep the personal details out of it. In fact, let’s diversify it and have the actor portrayals be open to interpretation. That’s all I called you for, Steve. You work for me, so deal with it. I’m hanging up now.”

He put the phone away and scowled for a moment before Damon tugged on his pants leg. Michael frowned, and stared down at Damon.

“What’s wrong, little guy?” he asked in a softer tone than I would have expected.

“I’m tired.”

Michael nodded and tousled Damon's hair.

"I'll just bet you are. It's been a big couple of days for you, hasn't it, Damon? Don't worry, I'll find a place for you and your mom to sleep."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "No, we should just head home."

"It's almost midnight, Jenna, and you're both exhausted. You can just crash here tonight."

"I'm so wired I don't know if I can sleep or not."

"Well, Damon can. He's practically falling asleep standing up. We can put him in my bed."

I sighed and nodded.

"All right."

I got up and carried Damon into the bedroom. I knew the way, and hadn't had to ask for directions, a fact of which both Michael and I were keenly aware.

Michael's bedroom was like something out of a storybook. He had a fantastic view looking out on the city, and the ocean beyond. The bedroom had plenty of room for his four-poster bed, carved of a rich, dark red wood and glazed to a sheen. A divan and daybed created a little lounge area beside a half bar stocked like a full bar. If that wasn't enough, the sliding glass door on the west side led to a terrace balcony with a hot tub.

I ignored the opulence of the room and laid my son down on the silken sheets.

"This is comfy," he said, settling in with a sigh. "Hey, Mom?"

I tucked him in and reached for the lamp.

“What is it, sweetie?”

“Can you leave the light on?”

“Sure, honey,” I said. I didn’t feel like debating the logic of his under-the-bed monster following us all the way across town. I dropped my hand from the lamp and kissed his forehead. Then I moved for the door.

“Hey, Mom?” he said just as I opened the door. I paused, and looked over my shoulder.

“What is it, honey?”

“Are we going to...” he yawned huge. “Are we going to live here from now on?”

“What?” I sputtered. “No, I mean... why would...”

“Oh.” He yawned again and closed his eyes, snuggling in deep to the blankets. “It would be nice if we did.”

I started, and turned back. When I came to the side of the grand California king bed, however, I found my son to be fast asleep. I stroked his cheek, and tucked a tuft of blonde hair out of his eyes. Then I kissed the top of his head and made for the door.

I supposed he was right. It would be nice to stay at a place like this one. Or maybe even this one. A place that also happened to include Michael.

I returned to the living room to find that Michael had changed the station to one of those picture-in-picture deals. The bigger screen showed the financial information from the internet. The smaller one displayed a football game in full swing.

At that moment, I felt very much the intruder. I knew how much my nightly routine meant to me. Here we were, in this man's home, interrupting god knew what. The man couldn't even watch the television without me interrupting it.

"Hey," I said. "I'm sorry for all of this."

"Sorry for what?"

He turned his gaze on me, thumb working the control to turn down the volume on his television. I licked my lips and chose my words carefully when next I spoke.

"I'm sorry about the inconvenience, I guess. I'm really grateful for the help, and I don't know how I can ever thank you properly. I just feel like we're invading your life and making it, well, inconvenient. You know?"

I felt stupid for rambling on like that, but Michael didn't seem to mind.

"Think nothing of it. You didn't ask for your mother to have a heart attack. I'm just happy to help you and your son."

I looked at him for a long moment, trying to figure out what was going through his head, and maybe, his heart. At length I spoke again.

"I'm surprised to see you being like this."

"Being like what?"

"Caring about people. I mean, I always suspected you cared more than you let on, but to actually see evidence of it is... weird."

He chuckled and shrugged his massive shoulders. "To tell you the truth, it's a bit of a surprise to me too. I don't really

hate people, you know. I just hate when people bring me down. Which happens all the time.”

His face turned sour and I knew he was talking about the robbery at his office.

“Did I bring you down?” I asked softly.

He turned his gaze my way and favored me with a long look.

“What do you mean?”

“Did I bring you down when I used to work for you? Is that why you fired me, Michael? Because I brought you down like so many other people?”

Michael’s nostrils flared, and his eyes grew distant with memory. I couldn’t tell if he was upset with me or not. At length his eyes focused on the here and now and he faced me dead on.

“Actually, there *is* one thing that I miss from that time.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jenna

“Well, Michael?”

I was getting tired of his games. I crossed my arms over my chest and stared him down.

“What’s the thing you miss so much from the good old days?”

“I think it would be best,” he said in that damn, calm and velvety voice of his. “If I were to show you.”

“Oh, you’re going to show me, huh?”

I hadn’t intended it to come out as bratty as it sounded. I was upset, on an emotional roller coaster. I’d just found out my mother was going to survive after an invasive surgery that turned her into a sort of cyborg. Not to mention two days before when she’d had a heart attack while watching my son.

A heart attack I helped to bring on because I was pushing her too hard, using her up as my main source of babysitting. I thought back to the times she’d tried to tell me that she was being overworked but I’d just blown her off.

I wasn’t blowing her off any longer.

I felt bad for lashing out at Michael. He’d been great through this whole ordeal. I looked up at him and sighed.

“I’m sorry. I’m not angry I’m just... it’s been a long couple of days, you know?”

“I know.”

He offered me his hand, and after a moment I took it. He led me out of the living room and into the kitchen.

“You brought me into the kitchen?” I asked incredulously. “I never cooked for you, ever, so I know you didn’t bring me in here because you’re nostalgic for my home-cooked cuisine.”

“Oh, I’m hungry all right, but not for dinner.” His eyes sparkled as he devoured me with his gaze. “I brought you in here to ask you a question.”

“A question?”

“Yes. Do you remember that time I kissed you when you sat on the kitchen island?”

I paused, and a flush of emotion brought color to my cheeks. I resisted the urge to pant, and tried to get control. Of myself and the situation.

“You’re going to have to be more specific. If I recall, there were lots of times we made out when I was sitting on the kitchen island.”

“Oh, but this one was special.”

He took me by the waist and lifted me up onto the counter. I yelped in surprise, but then everything just felt really comfortable. It felt like I belonged perched on the edge of the counter, with him melting me with a molten gaze.

“You see, you were sitting just in this spot,” he purred, stroking his fingers through my hair. “We’d just seen that off-Broadway production of Cats.”

“Oh lord, that was awful,” I said with a giddy laugh.

“Awful indeed,” he said, eyes shining. “But you were hauntingly beautiful in that opera dress.”

The memory came flooding back to me. I did recall that evening, and the dress which had been floor length yet clung to my body like a second skin, leaving my shoulders and a great expanse of cleavage bare.

He'd been unable to keep his eyes, let alone his hands off of me all night. I thought he was going to explode and start ripping clothes off the moment we hit the penthouse, but instead things sort of slowed down and chilled out. He set me down on the counter like he did tonight and then took his time making me feel amazing.

I was getting the same vibes here.

“So do you remember that night?” he asked, his mouth a few inches from my own.

“Yes,” I whispered.

He leaned in and kissed me, slow and sweet. My hand went to the side of his face, caressing his smoothly-shaven cheek until my fingers slid through his soft hair.

“And you remember what happened next?” His voice was a velvet caress on my skin and in my ears. A moan forced its way out of my mouth as his hot breath tickled the sensitive skin where my shoulder met my neck. His lips alighted there, softer than the fluttering of a moth's wing. Funny that such a soft touch could drive me so crazy.

“Yes,” I said in a shivering whisper as his lips worked their way back up to my lips. He kissed me hard, staking his claim.

I melted into him, lashing my tongue against his own when it invaded my mouth.

His hands moved under my neck, pinching the buttons of my white silk blouse. The first button came undone, his fingers brushing my bared skin. My heart thudded with eager anticipation of what was to come. I'll admit I've had worse trips down memory lane.

Michael kissed me on the neck as he undid the next button. His lips moved up near my ear, soft skin brushing against me.

"I remember how good your body smelled when I started unzipping your dress back then, too."

He bit my earlobe gently, then went back to mauling my neck. I cried out in a guttural rush, my hands clutching at his head as he trailed molten hot kisses all over my exposed skin. And his hands were busy making sure I had more and more of that all of the time.

Michael clutched me to his body in a fierce embrace. His mouth worked on my shoulder and neck while his hands switched gears to undoing the snaps of my bra in back. I ran my fingers through his luxurious hair and basked in his scent, his presence, and the way he made me feel at times like this one.

My bra came loose and Michael kissed his way down my chest. He enveloped my nipple inside of his mouth and suckled while his finger toyed with its twin. I gasped, pulses of delight throbbing through my body. As if in sudden relief, my lower half reared up to press against him.

“It looks like your body remembers me, too,” he mumbled into my soft flesh. His tongue darted out and made a slow, sensuous circle around my ever-hardening nipple. My mouth flew open in a guttural groan as he suckled.

His hand pressed against the small of my back, fingers worming under the top of my skirt. With expert aplomb considering the circumstances, he found the tiny zipper in back. I felt the release of my skirt as it ceased hugging my hips quite as tightly.

Michael left a trail of kisses down my belly. His hands grasped the waistband of my skirt at the sides. I planted my hands on the counter and lifted my bottom to ease the removal of my skirt. Michael slipped it off my legs, then grabbed my calf and kissed the inside of my thigh.

My heart thudded into overdrive as Michael’s soft lips left a trail of exhilaration and desire on my thigh. His hot breath blew over my quivering pussy. I sucked in a sharp gasp of air and squirmed, easing onto my back on the kitchen counter.

I felt my hand brush against the strap of my purse. I looked up at the kitchen ceiling for a moment, and was lost in memory. On that night, after the show, I’d looked up at this very ceiling while his face was buried in my pussy...

Michael’s fingers pried my swollen labia apart. I groaned, toes curling as I was jerked firmly back into the present. His breath across my quivering clitoris was almost too much to bear.

“I’d forgotten how cute your pussy is,” he purred. “How wet and juicy it is, too.”

He pressed his mouth into the pink trench between my shivering pussy lips and darted his tongue through it. Michael made sounds like a hungry animal devouring its prey. My hands clasped to the sides of his head as if I were holding on for dear life, and who knows, maybe I was.

“Your pussy tastes so good,” he growled. Michael slipped two fingers inside of my convulsing tunnel. I felt my body open up for him, inviting him right in. My pussy wanted to eat his cock, but it would settle for his fingers.

“Oh yes,” he purred into the soft folds of my body. “I know what you like, Jenna. I’ll take good care of my girl.”

He hooked his fingers upward, pushing the back of my clitoris up and out into his greedily suckling lips. My mouth opened wider than I thought possible and I squealed until I was out of breath.

I managed to drag another breath of air into my lungs before letting it out as a piercing scream. I flew right over the edge of climax and he continued to go to town on me until I flopped back onto the counter, a shivering, delighted mess. I was so high off the orgasm pulsing through me I thought I could hear colors and taste sounds.

“You know, Jenna,” he said, sweeping me off the counter and into his arms. It was a good thing he carried me, as I don’t know if I could have walked right about then.

He carried me into the living room, and set me down on the rolled armrest of the divan. I reached up and unbuttoned the top of his shirt.

“Do you remember the night after you sealed the Moskowitz deal?” I asked softly as I bared his toned chest in an ever-expanding V. I loved the way his skin felt beneath my fingertips. Michael had always kept himself in shape.

“I remember.”

“Yes, you were so furious after that meeting ended, even though you got what you wanted.”

“I was furious because they dared to argue with me,” Michael said. “When we all knew that it was going to go my way when the dust settled, period, end of story.”

“I thought you needed extra help calming down that day.” He doffed his shirt, tugging the sleeves and causing the garment to drop off behind him. I traced the hard knots of muscle in his abdomen with my fingers as I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his chest.

Michael’s hand petted my hair as I kissed my way down the expanse of toned flesh. My mouth moved over his six-pack abdominals. He flinched a little when my lips brushed the edge of his depressed belly button.

I moved a bit more slowly as I undid the buckle to his belt. The button fly came loose much more easily. I pulled the top of his shorts down and exposed his throbbing cock. My fingers encircled the shaft as his hand caressed the back of my head.

I knew what he wanted, and I wanted to be true to the memory. I opened my mouth and acted like a bad girl. I enveloped the head of his cock inside of my mouth and teased the underside with my tongue.

He gasped, his eyes squeezing shut. I admit to finding a certain satisfaction at being able to make this man who is normally in such total control lose that control. Lose that control because of how he felt about me.

I took more of his length, and he couldn't take it. He pulled me off of him and stood up to his full height.

"I don't remember this part," I said between pants.

"This part is new," he growled.

I cried out as he spun me around to face away from him. He bent me over the padded armrest. I went willingly, resting my elbows on the cushion on the opposite side. I spread my legs apart as he ran the throbbing head of his member through the groove of my pussy.

I couldn't wait to feel him inside of me. I lifted my hips, grinding my bottom against him in search of relief. He positioned himself behind me and then pushed his cock inside of my trembling body.

My eyes fluttered closed, and my hands made fists on top of the cushion as he glided inside of me. He filled me, stretched me, sent shivers of pure delight through my whole body. My pussy convulsed around him as he slid all the way in.

Michael pulled himself out about halfway and then thrust back in. My mouth became an O as he continued to thrust, moving his body in just the right way to hit just the right spots. I worked my body in concert with his own, remembering the way we used to heave and rise together.

Spots exploded in my vision as he thrust me toward the precipice of a thunderous orgasm. I saw it coming and

couldn't do anything to stop it, like watching a runaway train about to become a train wreck.

I sucked in a ragged gasp of air and let it out as a scream that left my voice hoarse afterward. Michael's hands grasped my hips, controlling my body as he thrust in again, slow and deep.

He thrust in again and stayed there, and came inside of me. His cock throbbed like mad and I tore at the cushions so hard I broke a nail. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed through me. I rode the surf of pleasure helplessly until I collapsed over the divan, panting like I'd just run a marathon.

Michael gently took me in his arms and then sat down on the divan. I lay draped across him, resting my head on his chest as we snuggled close.

"I needed that so much," I sighed into his skin.

"Good," he said. "Then you'll be ready to work tomorrow at nine am sharp."

Chapter Fifteen

Michael

“This is unacceptable.”

I tossed the file onto the meeting room table in disgust. After all of the things that had happened to potentially derail the merger between NonPoint and Leisure Unlimited, I was hoping for a little good news. I was hoping to grease the wheels of success instead of rusting them up into immobility again.

And then, I'd been faced with this report.

My eyes took in the totality of the meeting room. I sat with my team on the north end of the table. Chad looked between me and the others, trying to pretend he felt no emotions. Blake sat beside him, scribbling on a yellow-lined notepad with one hand and toying with his phone in the other. Trent looked as if he hoped I would whip out an ax and start chopping off the other team's heads one by one.

In a way, I felt like doing like he wished.

On the other side of the table sat Jenna and her team. Jenna wore a sharp charcoal blazer pant-suit combination that made her look like a government agent who shopped at places with valet parking. Beside her, Becky Storm tried to look less uncomfortable than she probably was. Next to her, Polnaraff tried to stare me down, but that wasn't going to get him

anywhere. The man who can stare me down hadn't been born yet.

Old man Joestar rolled his eyes and looked at his watch as if exasperated at how much time we were wasting. He might have been right, but I couldn't help feeling frustrated.

Jenna licked her lips and stood up.

“What do you mean, this is unacceptable? Can you be a little more specific please?” she asked.

She pointed at the file folder I'd tossed onto the table. “You asked us to prepare those documents, and then you barely glance at them before throwing them onto the table in disgust. You need to tell us what part of them displeases you if we're going to rectify the situation.”

They were, of course, the documents that had gone missing. Rather, they were an attempt to recollect the documents that had gone missing when the thief raided the office safe.

And a very poor attempt they were indeed, at least in my opinion.

“I'm not sure where to begin,” I sputtered.

“Here,” she said, taking the file folder, straightening it up, and handing it back to me. “Let's start at the beginning, and we'll go through everything that you find unsatisfactory one by one until we're done. How does that sound?”

She had used to handle me like that in the old days, too. When I grew too angry to be reasonable. On this day, though, I didn't feel like being reasonable. I was frustrated and angry and didn't care who knew about that. In fact, I went out of my way to let people know.

“Let’s see,” I said, snatching the file out of her hands. “Okay, report one, page one. Detail aging report not including accounts featuring negative balances. Only, I’m seeing an awful lot of negative balances here. It looks like your team couldn’t be bothered to check the right box on our file-sharing software.”

I tossed the file down onto the table and went to the next one.

“Report two, page three. Managerial task on time versus rate variance over a six-month time frame. Instead, I’m looking at managerial tasks on time versus a trial balance report of six weeks. That’s not even a unit of time we schedule on for either company.”

I dropped that report too and then took in Jenna’s team with my glare.

“I can’t use any of these reports. They’re useless. This is terrible, bad performance all around.”

I tossed the remaining files onto the table, spilling them out in a fan pattern totally by accident. It looked sort of cool, though.

“If I didn’t know any better, I would think that this was done on purpose as a way to sabotage the progress we’re making on the merger.”

My eyes narrowed to slits as my hand clenched into a fist on top of the table.

“Or at least, to stall our progress if not stop it cold.”

Jenna cleared her throat. “You’re right. These results are poor indeed. We’ll work on making it better.”

“I don’t need promises, Jenna. I don’t care about them. If someone gives me a promise and a cup of coffee, then I have exactly a cup of coffee when all is said and done.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she nodded and didn’t offer argument.

“I don’t care about promises. But do you know what I do care about?”

“Results,” Blake blurted eagerly, looking over at me out of the corner of his eye to see if I was impressed by it. I wasn’t and he deflated.

“I care about results,” I continued as if Blake had not spoken. I think everyone was on board with pretending that he had not. “If you can’t get me the results I need, then why are you even here, Jenna?”

Her eyes grew hard, but she didn’t offer verbal protest. Jenna’s gaze suggested she felt betrayed. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that line about her being ready for work at nine a.m. sharp while we were cuddling after mind-blowing sex. She had kind of taken that personally.

“Hey, you can’t call her out for this,” Becky said, standing up. “It’s not Jenna’s fault. She didn’t have time to look at the documents, she trusted us with this. If you want to blame someone, blame the three of us.”

She gestured at herself, Joestar, and Polnaraff.

“We’re the ones who prepared that file folder, so maybe you should blame us.”

“It doesn’t matter if she was directly involved in the mistake or not,” I said simply, dismissively. “Jenna was the one in

charge of this team. Any failure on your part is a failure in turn on her part. That is the way of leadership. You sink or swim along with your team, or you don't go anywhere at all."

"I'm sorry." Jenna bowed her head. "I had issues in my personal life lately and I have allowed it to bleed over into work."

I flinched, because I knew what she was talking about. Not only had her mother suffered a serious heart attack and then had a major surgery as a result, but she had lost her main babysitter as a result. Now she had to struggle between visiting her ill mother in the hospital, taking care of Damon, and managing the billion-dollar merger.

On some level, I knew that she was right and I was wrong. I was wrong to call her out when I knew what she was going through in her personal life.

But this is business and I can't afford to be influenced by feelings. I doubled down on what I had said in the first place.

"I don't care, Jenna," I snapped. "I don't care about you or your excuses. Someone please remind me what the difference is between a reason and an excuse."

Jenna's eyes grew dark and hard. For a moment I wondered if she was going to get up and leave right then. Part of me wished that she would, and free me from her damnable penetrating gaze. She laid bare parts of me I had struggled to keep concealed and buried for a long time. It didn't seem fair somehow, and my vulnerability made me bristle.

"How dare you talk to me like that," she snapped, her eyes laser-focused on me. "You want to complain about the file

folder not being up to snuff? We wouldn't even have to put it together, wouldn't even be in this situation in the first place if you hadn't let your documents get stolen."

I winced on the inside, because she was right. My paranoia and not having security cameras installed had come to be my downfall in this case. It was kind of a low blow, but then again I was swinging for the fences as well.

"The security gaffe was my fault. It was my fault the documents had gotten stolen. There, you see, that is how you take accountability. But the fact of the matter is, Jenna, I gave *you* that assignment. You were supposed to put those documents back together along with your team. If you choose to delegate the tasks given to you, that is your own business."

I leaned forward and rested my hand on the smooth surface of the tabletop.

"But if your delegated task fails to find its way to fruition, then the onus is upon you to complete said task or explain the reasons why it was not done."

"You're a fine one to talk. You know what I've been going through better than anyone else right now. Why are you flinging all of this up right now?"

"Because this is a business matter. You see that door?" I jabbed my finger at it. "You—"

"You have to leave your personal matters on the other side of that door if you want to succeed," she said in such perfect mimicry of my own delivery that my own team struggled not to laugh.

“That is what you were going to say, isn’t it?” She taunted me.

“Not necessarily.” I growled.

“Oh, sorry, I forget you have like a hundred door-based business proverbs. Shall we wait while you come up with another one?”

I couldn’t stand for anyone to challenge my authority. Especially at a meeting where billions of dollars were at stake. Yet, I couldn’t deny that she had a point.

And besides, I really hated making her unhappy. It killed my soul a piece at a time to see her suffer. I stared at her, then at the table. I cleared my throat and tried to sound as calm, cool, and collected as I could.

“Everyone just get to work on these documents. Right away. Immediately.”

I turned and left the room. I needed to cool off, maybe get some air and focus. It was all Jenna’s fault. Not because her team had flubbed the documents. No, it was because of the effect she had on me.

I couldn’t think clearly while Jenna was around. She demanded all of my attention without really trying. Even when I was talking about something else, she would creep back into my thoughts like an endless echo.

It made for a difficult time trying to focus on business, being so near to her. I felt closer to her than I had in years, and yet further away as well.

I headed out into the lobby and found Damon sitting on the floor, scribbling something on a piece of paper resting atop

my coffee table.

He looked up at my approach, a wide grin etching itself across his cherubic face.

“Hi, Michael,” he said cheerfully. “Wanna see my drawings?”

“Is this a trick question?” I said. “Of course, I want to see your drawings.”

He held them up proudly for me. I saw lots of pictures of him, his mother, and his grandmother.

What surprised me was that he had drawn me into many of the pictures as well. Just to confirm, I pointed at the stick figure with a necktie who was taller than all the others.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“That’s you, silly,” Damon said with an energetic giggle.

I smiled, and it really made me feel good to be in Damon’s pictures. For a moment, I kind of forgot all of my problems.

“Hey, Damon,” I said. “Do you want to see something cool?”

“Yeah,” Damon said with the supreme enthusiasm that can only be possessed by those under the age of ten.

“Then come with me.”

I led him down the hallway to a set of steps at the corner of the building. This was the tallest building in town, and I had an observation deck built on top.

A lot of days it was too windy or too cold to enjoy but today conditions were just right. I led Damon up the steps and onto the roof.

“Isn’t this view great?” I asked.

“I can’t see,” he whined.

“Oh.”

The safety fence was largely opaque up until about five feet up. I picked him up and put him on my shoulders, legs dangling down either side of my neck.

“There you go, champ, is that better?”

“Yeah!” he said eagerly.

I wondered if this warm feeling that coursed through me was what fatherhood felt like. I mean really, really felt like.

If it was what fatherhood felt like, I decided that I liked it, a lot.

It was something I could get used to. Something I could get used to having every single day.

Chapter Sixteen

Jenna

I paced back and forth across my mother's apartment, arms crossed over my chest. I kept stopping by the window and peering out to see if I could spot my mother.

"Mommy, why do you keep looking out the window?"

I turned to see Damon peering at me from behind a support pillar. Above him, the banner we had hung up wavered in the breeze kicked up by the ceiling fan. *Welcome Home Grandma*, it read.

"I'm just looking for Gramma, sweetie," I said, murmuring from behind my hand. I was starting to get worried. "Oh, why didn't she let me give her a ride home?"

I continued to pace while Damon looked at me with a quizzical expression.

"You shouldn't worry, Mom. Just relax, it's all going to be all right. The doctors fixed Gramma up and that's why she's coming home."

I turned to him and pursed my lips, trying to figure out the best way to say what I had to say. I'd talked to Damon several times already about what to expect from Grandma now that she was coming back home from the hospital... and what not to expect from her as well.

"Damon, remember what we talked about. They had to put a big cut on Grandma and it's going to take a long time to heal.

She needs peace and quiet for her to recover, so things aren't going to be quite the same anymore, okay?"

"Okay, Mom," he said, all serious and somber again. I nodded in satisfaction, because that's the expression Damon got when he finally understood something.

Of course, that didn't stop him from squealing with delight when the front door did finally pop open. I cursed myself because I had stopped looking to talk to Damon and missed my mother coming in through the front doors of the building.

"Damon, no," I called as he ran over to my mother to hug her legs.

"It's all right, dear." My mother smiled ear to ear, and she looked, by all appearances, healthy as could be.

Of course, I knew better than that. She leaned some of her weight against the doorframe, and she was a little more out of breath than she used to be from having walked through the lobby and down the hallway.

"I don't need peace and quiet," Mom went on to say, doffing her coat and moving inside her apartment. "I mean, the hospital had plenty of peace and plenty of quiet."

She winked at me.

"I couldn't stand it! I missed the sounds of people living their lives. Children playing, the nasty old guy down the hall cursing out the building super, all of it. But most of all I missed you and Damon."

"I'm glad you're out of the hospital Mom," I said. "Just make sure you don't overdo it, all right? You're not going to be Damon's babysitter any longer. He'll still come to visit but no

more caregiving. For a while, it's you who gets to be on the receiving end of care. Won't that be a fun twist?"

My mom sighed and waved off my concerns.

"Oh, fiddlesticks. I'm right as rain. I'm better than I was before, because now I have cyborg technology inside of me." She looked down at Damon and grinned. "Your Gramma is basically the Terminator now."

Mom put on her sunglasses and leered at Damon.

"I'll be back," she said in a thick accent.

Damon squealed and ran away to hide behind a pillar, like we'd planned before. It was a little late to surprise her, but that didn't stop Damon from jumping out from behind the pillar and shouting, at the top of his lungs...

"Surprise!"

"Little late, kiddo," I said, tousling his hair.

"Oh my, I didn't even see this before, when I came in," Mom said, gaping at the banner hanging over the living room. "This is so nice. What a wonderful thing to come home to."

"I picked out the colors, Gramma," Damon said. "Me, I did it. All by myself."

"Here, Mom, sit down," I guided her over to her easy chair and pretty much forced her to sit in it. "I got you some of that sparkling grape juice you like from the bodega down the street."

"And I got you some yogurt-covered raisins," Damon said.

"Oh, I love these," Mom said with a sigh, taking them from Damon. "They taste great, and they're great for keeping

regular.”

Damon’s face scrunched up. “What’s keeping regular mean, Gramma?”

“Um, why don’t you help me pour the grape juice, honey,” I said from the kitchen.

We celebrated in the living room for a time. It felt good to have my mom home back where she belonged. And yet, I knew that this wasn’t a return to the good old days. Not really. This was the last hurrah. My mother was going to be spending a lot less time with Damon soon, and that would affect both of their lives.

It was for the best, really. My mother was no longer able to keep up with Damon, and the last thing I wanted was for her to have more medical issues because she was pushing herself too hard for mine and Damon’s sake.

“Hey, Gramma,” Damon said. “Guess what? Do you wanna see my drawings?”

“You can’t say guess what and then ask another question, buddy,” I said as I sipped my sparkling grape juice on the sofa.

“Of course I want to see your drawings,” Mom said. “Bring them over here. Oh, and bring Gramma’s glasses from the end table too, while you’re at it.”

Damon dutifully raced across the living room floor, timbers creaking under his socked feet. He grabbed a stack of his drawings, raced most of the way back to Mom, then stopped. He shuffled back and grabbed her glasses. They were

contained inside of a hard, button-down case with a floral pattern on it.

He kind of flopped the glasses onto her lap.

“Damon, be more careful with Grandma’s glasses,” I said.

“They’re bifocals, dear, they’ll probably outlast the next ice age.”

“Not the point, Mom. He needs to learn to respect other people’s things.”

Mom gave me a look and then shrugged. “All right, honey, if that’s the way you want it. I seem to recall someone who used to like to wear their mother’s glasses and pretend like they were Cyclops from the X men...”

My face burned with embarrassment.

“And I was wrong to do it back then, too.”

Mom clucked her tongue as she put her glasses on her face. The paper crinkled in her hands as she held it up in front of her.

“These are really good, Damon.” Of course, she was Grandma, so she was required to say that. Still, I thought that my son’s pictures were pretty good for his age, and I’m sure my mom thought so as well. “Is this me?”

“No, that’s Mom.” Damon pointed with his little finger at another figure on the page. “This is you, Grandma. See how you have glasses on?”

Glasses? So that’s what they were. I thought he was drawing people with robber masks for some reason.

“And who is this?” she asked, pointing at a tall figure in a blue and purple tie. My blood froze in my veins, because I recognized that tie. The pattern wasn’t the same, but the colors were a dead match.

A dead match for one of Michael’s favorite ties.

“That’s Michael,” he said.

“Michael?” Mom’s eyes glittered. “I haven’t met any Michael.”

She knew good and well who Michael was. My mom was just using the drawing as an excuse to talk about Michael in front of me without actually bringing up the subject.

“Michael is a man my mom works with,” Damon said easy as a breeze. “He’s really nice.”

Nice? I couldn’t help my jaw falling wide open. Nobody I knew of would ever categorize Michael as ‘nice.’ Not in a million years. Yet my son... our son... had used just that word to describe Michael.

Damon leaned over and whispered to his grandma in a conspiratorial tone.

“I think he’s trying out to be my new daddy, but Mommy doesn’t like it when I say that.”

Jesus Christ, both of them. Both of them were working against me. Or maybe as they saw it, working for me.

If only my mother and my son knew how convoluted the relationship between myself and Michael truly was. It went beyond an old affair, beyond being his employee. Beyond me getting fired and dumped in the same day.

“You know what?” Mom checked the time on her phone. “I think there’s new episodes of Wooldoor Sockbat on the streaming channel. Why don’t you go and see if there’s any you haven’t seen yet?”

“Yay, I love Wooldoor Sockbat!” Damon leaped up from the floor and raced into the living room. He knew just what remote to pick up and how to use it. The kid was only four and he had a leg up on me. I had no idea how to navigate all of that junk.

My mother was just arranging things so she and I could have a real talk. I knew it and on some level I no longer dreaded it as much as I used to.

“I’m sorry for burdening you with this,” I said.

“Oh, I don’t want to hear it,” Mom replied with a snicker. “It’s no burden. But maybe if you want to talk about it, I can help you reevaluate things a little bit.”

I heaved a long sigh.

“You know, maybe it did help me to reevaluate everything on a deeper level.”

I ran a hand down my face and grimaced.

“I didn’t even try to get a nanny or some kind of daycare for Damon the last couple of weeks. It’s like I don’t want to leave him alone. I want to be with him all the time now.”

My eyes misted up a little bit and I sniffled.

“I guess with you getting sick, I was worried that something would happen to him, too.” I dabbed at my cheeks with a handkerchief.

“There’s no need for that now. I can take him sometimes. In point of fact, I demand time with my grandbaby.” She laughed and tapped her chest. “I didn’t become a cyborg just so I could never see my grandson again.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, even though she’d just told me to stop apologizing. “I mean, I just have to finish this damn merger, and then I’ll change everything about my work-life balance. I swear.”

“You’ll know I’ll support you no matter what you decide, sweetie,” Mom said. “But I’ve heard that speech about work-life balance before.”

“I’ve said that speech about work-life balance before,” I said with a sigh. “Many many times. This time I mean it, though.”

Mom gave me a long look, and eventually I got tired of it.

“What?”

“I’m just saying, why not get daycare? Why bring Damon along to the office? I know that Michael is Damon’s father, you know. There’s no point in trying to keep it a secret.”

I sat down on the sofa and felt like a deflated balloon.

“I’m just so confused, Mom.” I covered my face with my hand. “I’m just so confused. I mean, Damon and Michael clearly like each other. It breaks my heart when I see them together and neither of them know the truth about each other.”

I shook my head and pulled my hand away from my face.

“And then there’s Michael himself. Sometimes, it seems like he’s really changed and become a more complete person. And

sometimes...”

My expression darkened.

“Sometimes, he seems like he hasn’t changed at all.”

Mom gave me a long, hard stare, but it was tinged with empathy.

“I don’t know, honey. I understand there’s a lot more to this than you’re letting on, but I do hate to pry. However, I think that you have to tell Michael that Damon is his child.”

“Mom, come on... he’ll just think I’m trying to use it to manipulate him.”

“It doesn’t matter. He might think that, and he might not. The fact of the matter is, no matter what happened between you and Michael, he hasn’t done anything so terrible he doesn’t deserve to know his own child...”

She arched her graying brows at me.

“Has he?”

“No,” I said quickly. “Breaking up with me and even firing me aren’t really justifications for not letting him know he has a secret love child.”

“It’s just the right thing to do,” Mom said. “There’s no excuse anymore. If you were going to try to use your child to get money or influence over Michael, you would have done it a long time ago. It should be clear to Michael that you’re not like that. I mean, he seems like a smart enough fellow except that he never should have let you go.”

I sat there for a long time while she knitted and Damon played in the other room. I didn’t speak to her. I just took out

my phone and brought up my contacts list. My finger hovered over the button for a long moment, and then I pressed it.

“Hey,” I said as soon as Michael picked up. “We need to talk.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jenna

“It’s good that you called. We need to discuss the situation at hand.”

I froze halfway through Michael’s office door. He knew what was going on? Already? My mind flashed through a dozen scenarios of how Michael could have found out the truth about Damon.

Then I realized that Michael’s tone was all wrong. It wasn’t a ‘grave personal matters tone,’ it was a ‘pure business’ tone. Did that mean he treated vital family stuff like business matters?

Confusion reigned in my brain until I realized that he had just assumed I wanted to talk about the merger business.

I decided that I should probably play along with that assumption for the time being. I entered the office, feeling strange. It wasn’t the late hour, it was more like I was here on personal business but now financial matters were taking center stage. I had brought my body and mind to work, but not ‘to work’ and now I had to reset.

He gestured at one of the empty seats at his desk. I settled into the chair and naturally looked at his computer screen. He had three videos in small windows open on his desktop. I recognized the names. Chad, Trent, and Blake. His three goonies on the merger squad.

“What’s all of this, then?” I asked, gesturing at the screen.

“This,” he said, sensual lips twisting with distaste, “is me trying to go over the interviews I conducted with my team members so I can figure out who leaked the information about the merger to the press and then robbed me.”

He shook his head and scowled.

“Did you find out if one of them was connected to it in any way?” I asked.

Michael’s steely gaze flicked over to me.

“No, not yet. I’m almost mad at them for their seeming innocence.”

“They didn’t break under your interrogation, huh?” I asked with a chuckle.

“No, they did,” he said coldly. “They did break. They would have told me if they had been somehow connected.”

He sat back in his chair and transfixed me with his gaze. The lines at the sides of his eyes seemed more pronounced now. I thought that he must have been at work for quite some time without a break.

“I didn’t just look at these three. I’ve spoken to anyone and everyone who’s ever been in spitting distance of the safe, even tangentially. There’s been no such luck.”

“What are you saying, Michael?” I frowned, feeling more uneasy about the reason I had come there with every passing second.

“I’m saying I really don’t think that the problem happened on my team.” His tone was level and smooth as polished marble,

and about as heavy. “It makes me think it had to be someone on your team who was responsible.”

“How can you be sure your team isn’t responsible?” I tried and failed to keep my tone level. I didn’t like where this was going.

“Because my men wouldn’t dare cross me. They fear and respect me too much.”

“Oh, spare me,” I snarled. “Spare me your big, bad silverback routine. Your posturing and belligerence? Not your best qualities, and not the strengths you think they are.”

He closed his mouth and eyed me coldly. It was the polar opposite of the way he looked at me right before we made love, and I think I may have shivered for all of the wrong reasons.

“And let’s not forget, Michael, that the documents were stolen from your safe. What’s that you’re always saying about responsibility? I don’t hear you going on about it now.”

Michael’s face twisted into a sneer.

“The robbery had to be a professional job.”

“A professional job?” I scoffed. “So Catwoman broke in and stole your documents, that’s going to be your excuse?”

“It’s not unheard of, Jenna. A professional burglar was hired to do it by the mole on your team. The same mole that leaked the merger to the press and stalled the process by doing a bad job with the documents.”

I groaned both inwardly and outwardly.

“You need to find the rat on your team, and do it quickly.”

“How can you be so sure that there’s a rat on my team?”

“Because there’s no other explanation. I know it didn’t happen on my end.”

“Yeah, right,” I sneered. “Because your people fear and respect you too much. I’ve got news for you, Michael. The only person people both fear and respect is God. Us mere mortals have to choose one or the other, and you’re better off going with respect every time.”

“Who said anything about being a mere mortal? Exceptional people get exceptional things done.”

“Is that why you fired me five years ago? I wasn’t exceptional? I was too ordinary?” I felt like I’d been punched in the gut. “I mean, Zeus cast me off of Mt. Olympus with a nice wham bam thank you ma’am as severance.”

“I didn’t bring you here to talk to you about the past, Jenna.”

I scoffed.

“You didn’t bring me here at all. I called you, remember? I’m the one who said I had something to talk about.”

“And I assumed it was the most important matter imaginable, which is the mole on your team. Who knows what this mole will get up to next, Jenna? I suggest that we find them and put an end to their mischief soon.”

“The mole is the least of my concerns in this very moment —”

“Quiet, Jenna,” he said sternly, his brows coming low over angry eyes. “Don’t talk back to me again.”

My eyes went wide, and my jaw fell open. *Don't talk back to me?* Who did Michael think he was?

“Why are you doing this, Michael?” My voice was soft, quiet, and yet seemed very loud.

“Why am I doing what?” he scoffed. “Trying to take care of business? Like we're supposed to do?”

“No, stop being willfully obtuse,” I snapped. “You know how much it pisses me off. You're acting like you did when I used to work for you. Like I'm a piece of dirt. What's next? Are you going to sleep with me and then discard me like yesterday's trash again?”

Michael stared at me for a long time, his eyes swimming with a lot of conflicting things. Shock, anger, and other, more tender things that made my heart race.

Then he reached out and took my hand. I tried to pull it away to reflex, but he held it tight.

“This is a business and I can't treat business any other way.” His eyes remained as level as his tone when he spoke. Then the granite façade cracked and his expression softened. “But between you and me is not like it was last time. It's not the same all right? It's different.”

“Why?” I asked, my voice breaking a bit at the end. “Why is it different this time?”

“Because, Jenna. You're different. Maybe I'm a bit different now, too.” He shook his head, lips forming an inverted U. “Ah, it's so damn confusing. All I know is that now, after being with you again I think that maybe back then was just, I don't know...”

He lifted his gaze to meet my own, and my soul ached to be near his. Michael was being a lot more open with me than was usual for him, even when we were physically intimate.

“I think maybe back then was just the wrong time for us to meet each other.”

I stopped trying to take my hand back and stared at him for a long time. He let me sit and think until I was ready to speak.

“I don’t know, Michael. Sometimes you’re kind, and sweet, and I think that maybe you have changed and things are different.” My eyes narrowed. “But then, you act cruel to me and I wonder if the other side of you isn’t just an act. Just a ruse to lure me into a false sense of security so you can hurt me some more.”

“I don’t mean to be cruel, Jenna.” He shook his head. “Not with you. Or anyone else, really. I don’t like being cruel for cruelty’s sake, but there are certain realities with business on this level, with this high of stakes.”

Michael sighed before he continued.

“Look, Jenna, I know that rich guys like me and Evan, we’ll be alright even if this merger doesn’t go through. It will hurt financially for a while but our lifestyles won’t change all that much. Not so for the people who work at NonPoint and Leisure Unlimited. Their futures are riding on this, so we have to keep that in mind when we’re doing business. How it will affect the companies from top to bottom, most especially our people.”

I was flabbergasted. I could see it was important to Michael that I not think him wantonly cruel.

“Business is who I am and what I do,” he said firmly. “I have to see this deal through. You understand, Jenna? I have to see it through.”

His eyes grew softer and he squeezed my hand gently.

“But maybe after this whole merger is over, then we could explore where this thing between the two of us might lead—”

I leaped to my feet and glared at him.

“There can never just be only the two of us, Michael.”

“Oh, of course,” he says, shaking his head. “Of course, you mean Damon. Well, I understand that you and he are a package deal. That’s what I meant when I said the two of us, I meant you and Damon. He’s a great kid. I like him.”

I covered my face with my hands, my eyes peering out between my fingers. I think I may have sobbed. Michael leaped to his feet, sending his chair rolling backwards.

“Hey,” he said, embracing me in his warmth. “Come here.”

I buried my face in his chest and tried not to cry. Mostly I failed at this task. Michael held me for a while as a gentle rain fell against the windowpane.

“Hey,” he said softly, pulling away from me slightly. Michael lifted my chin gently with his fingers so our gazes met. “I don’t mean to pry, but what about Damon’s father? Is he going to be in the picture at all?”

I opened my mouth to speak. This was it, the perfect moment to tell Michael the truth. The perfect moment to tell him that Damon was his child.

And yet, as much as it hurt me, I decided to postpone revealing the news to him. Just until after the merger was done. Then I would try again, because I didn't know what the consequences might be if I told him right there and then.

I had no idea how he might react. It might endanger the merger, and I knew that would devastate Michael.

"I wouldn't worry about him causing you any trouble, if that's what you're getting at," I said, biting my lower lip as I wriggled my body against his own. "In fact, I think that right now your hands are full of all the... trouble... you can handle."

He pulled me even tighter into him. I could feel his erect member through the fabric of his pants. Michael swept his hand down my spine to the slope of my ass. Then he grabbed firmly of my right cheek and kneaded the pliant flesh.

I moaned deep and low, like an animal. Michael kissed me deep, and all of a sudden I forgot all about telling him Damon was really his son.

Chapter Eighteen

Michael

I ravished Jenna's mouth with my own, my hands gripping her fine bottom and pressing her body tight against my own. My skin tingled with excitement, nowhere as potent as my cock. I twitched hard, and I knew she could feel it. Jenna knew she was the cause of it.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I think I was aware that she hadn't directly answered my question about Damon's father. Not only that, but she hadn't really responded to my offer in any tangible way.

Unless you count trying to seduce me, of course. Not that she had to try too hard, pun fully intended.

I gave up worrying about her motives and instead just exulted in having Jenna in my arms. I hadn't realized how much I would miss her when we broke up all those years ago. I still wonder if things would have worked out then if I hadn't broken it off with her.

Now I supposed that we would never know. I could only handle the present and plan for the future. And speaking of the present, I couldn't get enough of her. I loved the taste of her skin.

I kissed her neck, finding the tender spots I knew drove her crazy. Jenna moaned and clutched at me all the tighter when I

licked her neck before leaving a flurry of soft, lingering kisses along her slickened flesh.

I tugged the hem of her skirt upward, exposing her ass. My hand roamed around, feeling the fragile thong panty separating me from my goal. I hooked my fingers in the thong and pulled it aside easily. My fingers slid into her slickened pussy, only an inch or so but enough to feel how hot and wet she was.

She cried out, and practically climbed me like a tree. I laughed as I laid on my back upon the desk. She climbed up and straddled me, her hands working at my belt.

She was so damn sexy, panting with need, her skirt hiked up around her waist, one of her nipples hanging partially out of her bra. I basked in the view while she got my cock out. Looking wasn't good enough, though, and I had to touch.

Jenna cried out as I rolled her over so she lay on her back. I got up on top, asserting my dominance as I pulled her shirt open wider. I buried my face between her breasts as my fingers toyed with her wide open, dripping wet pussy through the thin membrane of her panties.

Those panties were annoying me. They were in the way. I could take them off, but then I'd have to stop kissing her from mouth to neck to breast and back again. That would be unacceptable, so instead I grabbed the waistband and tore them right off her body.

She moaned into my mouth as her panties ripped free. I slid my fingers through the groove between her swollen pussy lips as I moved my mouth down to her neck again.

At some point we got her bra off, don't ask me how. I was a little bit distracted. I think it unsnapped in the front or something like that. At any rate, I kissed over the barrier of her skirt, a rolled-up wrinkled line separating her belly from her pleasure valley.

My lips left butterfly-soft kisses along her skin as I moved inexorably toward her pussy. I loved the sounds she made, a symphony of moans and sighs and soft cries which had nothing to do with pain or fear.

I enjoyed making Jenna feel good. And not in a trophy orgasms kind of way, either. I genuinely derived pleasure from the act.

I sat down in her rolling chair and pushed her thighs apart. Her pussy spread open for me, the lips wide apart.

“You're so ready for me to eat this juicy pussy, aren't you?” I moved my face in close, my fingers teasing the mouth of her opening. Jenna cried out, her hands going down to caress my hair. Sometimes she tried to push my head in closer, but I never let her do that. I would go down on her when I decided to, and only when I thought she was ready to explode.

“I asked you a question, Jenna,” I said in a mock stern tone while my fingers traced circles around her pink softness. “You need to answer me.”

“Yes,” she gasped.

“Yes, what?”

“Oh God, you're so mean,” she cried. I leaned in and pursed my lips, carefully kissing her exposed and swollen clitoris. Her moan turned into a shriek.

“Yes, I’m ready for you to eat my pussy,” she gasped as her breathing approached something akin to normalcy.

I buried my face between the petals of her open flower. My lips sought out her nether lip, latching on and suckling. Her juices slid onto my tongue and my heart thudded a rapid tattoo inside of my chest.

I groaned like a feasting lion as I worked my lips over her swollen labia. I suckled hard, getting every last drop I could of her sweet nectar. Jenna’s hands gripped my head so tight it felt like she was on the verge of pulling my hair out.

I pulled out on her pussy lip, stretching it like taffy with my mouth. I reached up and grabbed her wrists and then pushed her hands up and to her sides, pinning them there. She squirmed a little but didn’t really try to escape.

My mouth dove into the other side and gave it equal attention. I loved how she tasted, how she smelled, and how she felt against my skin. I slithered my tongue in circles around her clitoris while my fingers wormed in ever deeper. I had three of them inside of her at that point.

She groaned, writhing in my grip, then sucked in a sharp gasp of air when I sucked on her clit. Jenna’s scream filled the air, echoing off the kitchen walls as she came hard.

“I remember some good times out on the terrace, too,” I said.

“Oh God, you think I can walk right now?”

I pulled her arms until she sort of doubled over on my shoulder. Jenna laughed as I hefted her into the air.

“Oh, you caveman brute,” she said while playfully pounding my back with her balled-up fists. “Whatever are you going to

do to me?”

I carried her out of the penthouse and up the steps leading to the observation deck. I set Jenna down facing away from me, her hands resting on the rails.

“I love this view,” she said with a sigh. “I always did.”

She reached behind herself and pulled me in closer. I enveloped her in my embrace as we looked out over the city. The glowing lights remained static or moved along with the flow of traffic.

“You ever wonder if there are a lot of other people pretty much doing what we’re doing right now?” her soft voice was as translucent as moonlight.

“I don’t know. I’m only worried about us right now.”

“I’d like to think a lot of people are,” she said.

I thought about it for a moment.

“Me too.”

I swept my hands over and cupped her perfect breasts. She smiled, leaning her head back as her silken mane trailed down my shoulder. I kissed her on the back of the neck as her cry of passion was carried away by the wind and the traffic.

Jenna wriggled her bottom, her hands playing with my cock. I groaned as she stroked the shaft with expert aplomb. I so loved it when she played with me like this. This used to be a pose we would hold for quite a while, both of us able to enjoy the view.

Of course, sometimes she would wind up staring at the street below, when I bent her over the rail and took her from

behind.

She continued to writhe like a serpent, winding her coils about me as it were. I bit her shoulder just hard enough to remind her I was in charge. A shiver passed through Jenna's body as I worshiped her body with my own.

I was so erect at that point it hurt. I needed to put my cock inside of her in the worst way. I put my hand on the nape of Jenna's neck and pushed her forward. She went with the motion, laying her elbows on the railing.

My legs trembled with need as I pushed my cock between her quivering pussy lips. Jenna's mouth flew open as I glided inside of her. I groaned at the tightness of her warm, dripping-wet pussy. My eyes watered as she convulsed, her greedy pussy drawing me in even further.

I thrust into her as the traffic crawled on below us. Her earlier comment returned to my mind. Perhaps we were like gods on Mt. Olympus, fucking our brains out while looking down on the mere mortals below.

Before, when I'd made love to Jenna, I had still thought of her as a subordinate. As someone I could both possess and control.

Now I sort of saw her as someone at least approaching my own level, I supposed. Maybe that changed things, or maybe I really had changed as much as I said I had earlier.

All I knew was, it was the best sex of my life.

I gripped her hips tightly, my fingers sinking into her soft skin. Jenna ground herself against me, finding a rhythm to

match my own. Our bodies worked together trying to reach that perfect synchronicity of which so many speak.

Then we hit it. I don't know quite how it all came together, no pun intended, I only know that it did. All of a sudden we were just in perfect sync. Both of us opened our mouths and gave voice to our passion. It felt so good I couldn't hold back any longer.

I had never felt so connected to anyone in all of my life. Not once, ever. In that moment I loved being inside of her more than anything. I felt as if I had been born to be inside of her, to please her and take care of her. Don't get me wrong, it was fantastic for me, too.

I just found that her pleasure was more important than my own. On some level it tried to bother me, but I wouldn't let it stop me from making love to her all night long.

I came hard, groaning as my legs semi-buckled. My weight crushed her down onto the railing, and she came even harder. Her cries could not have been heard by those below, and yet they would have been shocked by the sheer intensity and volume.

Her pussy clamped down on me hard as a vice and then contracted in a series of spasms. I filled her up as I just seemed to keep on coming myself. At last I collapsed over her, both of us panting in unison.

"I remember that, yeah," she said dreamily.

I pulled her back into my arms and we heaved together, almost stumbling and falling over. In a way I wouldn't have

minded. That would have been a hell of a moment to go out on.

I took her back downstairs, where we both drank a full glass of magnetized imported water a piece and then we explored more memories in the workout room. And the shower. And the outdoor terrace again.

I made sure she came every time, and took good care of her. It was really important to me that she enjoy herself. I wanted her to feel so good we could put the grimness of the theft and the conflict resulting from the merger from our minds.

We laid there together for quite a while once our passions cooled. Or to be blunt, our spirits were willing but our bodies needed some rest.

She stroked my cheek and just looked me in the eyes for a long time. It was sweet, and tender, and my heart softened for her in ways it never had before. I hoped she would give my offer some thought, and try to make things work between us.

I meant what I said about her son, too. I liked Damon. I felt like maybe I could step in. I could be the step-dad, as in the dad who stepped up. I liked the sound of that.

We lay cuddling together on the lounge in my office when my phone rang. I'm not sure of the time, but it was still before dawn.

I picked it up and scowled at the name on it. My lawyer, Higgins. Why would he be calling me at that ungodly hour?

"It's my attorney," I grumbled.

"Your attorney? Did you get into trouble or something?"

“My tax attorney.”

“Oh.”

Before I could even speak, he started talking the moment the call connected.

“Boss, we’ve got huge problems.”

“I’m listening,” I said, trying to remain calm. If he said it was a huge problem then I was very worried indeed, because Higgins was not given to hyperbole.

“It’s the IRS. They’re raiding us.”

Chapter Nineteen

Jenna

“I don’t understand.” Joseph Joestar’s eyes were filled with equal parts doubt and concern. “I thought that the report said the IRS didn’t find anything amiss at either company involved in the merger.”

I listened intently along with everyone else in the meeting room. We were near the top floor in Michael’s building, inside of one of the conference rooms. I think Michael liked this one because we’d had sex in it quite a few times. Then again, it did have a pretty good view as well, looking out on the verdant brilliance of the park.

Polnaraff sat beside Joestar, scribbling notes on his pad. From time to time he would glance up and around the room as if checking to see if he missed anything during his rigorous note-taking sessions. Then he would dive back into scribbling on his paper. The scratch of his pen on paper almost made a soothing sound to me at that point of the meeting.

Becky sat to my immediate left, and she seemed to be brimming with energy. Or anxiety, it could be difficult to tell with her. There are two paths available to women who want to enter the business world, especially on as high of a level as the merger entailed.

Path number one, you try to do the best you can to navigate what is still perceived as a man’s world while maintaining your dignity and femininity, or number two, you give yourself

a non-surgical lobotomy and become as stone-faced and indomitable as someone like Michael. Becky had chosen path number two a long time ago, and it was hard to blame her.

Across the table, the three little piggies as I had come to think of them just glared daggers at us. They thought it was all my fault that they'd had to endure so much questioning and probing from Michael. You know that old saying if looks could kill? Let's just say that I would have been dead and buried about a thousand times before the meeting even started.

Michael himself remained at the head of the table, trying to use that little bit of extraterritoriality to show he was in control. His eyes bored into Joestar as if trying to figure out if he were being that wrong on purpose or as some part of a sinister plot.

I could see that Michael had not given up on the notion that the saboteur had to come from my side of the merger team. That disappointed me somewhat, especially after we'd seemed to turn a page the other day.

Then again, I was feeling guilty about not telling Michael about Damon being his son when I had the perfect opportunity. I guess that some part of my mind had determined that as soon as the merger was over there would be plenty of time to pick apart the tangled web that was my relationship with Michael Wallace.

“The problem isn't how much damage the false tip to the IRS may or may not have caused,” Michael said, cutting off the next thing Joestar had been about to say. “The problem is that someone is giving tips to the IRS in the first place.

“The IRS doesn’t even know the identity of their whistleblower.”

“Yeah, that’s what they say,” Blake muttered, “but we all know the truth.”

I gave him a glare but Blake didn’t play along. He kept his gaze on his master like any dutiful hound dog.

“I know exactly where the whistleblower comes from,” Michael said bluntly. “He comes from someone on your team, and you can’t handle it.”

I stood up and planted my hands on the table, fixing him with my baleful glare. He didn’t back down an inch but then again I hadn’t expected him to. I only knew that I was furious.

“This again. Why can’t you let this go, Michael?” I heaved a long sigh. “I assume you have some proof of your claims?”

He grew tight-lipped, and I pressed my advantage.

“No? No proof at all? Not one shred of evidence to present to the court to support your accusations against my team?”

He straightened up his posture and tried to act like he was still in control.

“Obviously, if I had proof, the guilty party would be in handcuffs and this merger would be a settled matter.”

“Oh, obviously. In other words, no, you don’t have any evidence.”

“I know that it’s not anyone on my team,” Michael said stiffly.

“Yeah,” Blake chimed in, his face split in a wide grin. “We know it’s none of us. The boss even made us take lie detector

tests.”

“Yeah,” Trent said, “and we told Chad that if he put a clothespin on the seam of his balls, he’d be guaranteed to pass.”

Chad’s face turned red, though whether it was from embarrassment or anger I couldn’t tell.

“It’s not funny, you assholes. I had to go to the doctor and everything after that stupid clothespin... I mean, I never did anything stupid like that, you guys are dumb, haha.”

“I do have some evidence it’s no one on my side of the merger,” Michael said.

I stared him right in the eye, my nostrils flaring, and tried to keep my tone calm and civil when I spoke. I was about fifty percent successful.

“Okay, let’s hear about this ‘evidence’ of yours, Michael. Tell me why it’s such a goddamn certainty that the mole comes from my side of the merger.”

“It’s really quite simple, cut, and dried.” Michael shrugged as if it were no big deal. Or more likely, his shrug was meant to signify that it didn’t matter what his opinion on it was, it was just a fact. “If, and I do mean *if*, one of my employees were desperate enough, crazy enough, or stupid enough to try and double cross me, they would never cut their own throat in the process.”

I waited for him to explain that one but of course, he did not. When I got tired of his enigmatic bullshit silence and sighed and prompted him.

“Well? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, that they would never hurt the value of their own stock. Would they sabotage the Leisure Unlimited brand? Absolutely. Would they sabotage their own brand, the one they own stock in? Of course not.”

I wanted to wipe the smug look right off of his face. Here he was, going right back to type. Michael Wallace, the alpha male jack hole out to dominate everything who always had to be right. Always.

“You’re underestimating how much it might be worth to some parties to disrupt this merger,” I said.

“Don’t talk to Mr. Wallace like that,” Chad snapped.

Polnaraff stood up so fast his butt knocked over his chair

“And you don’t talk to her like that.”

“Hey, let’s all settle down,” Joestar said, holding his hands out, palms facing outward. “Let’s not turn on each other.”

“Why not?” Trent said with a sneer. “We all know the mole comes from your side. We might as well treat you all like an enemy. Then we’re guaranteed to be right at least about one of you.”

“And wrong about the other three,” Becky pointed out.

Trent shrugged.

“It’s not like your side contributed much to the efforts and proceedings anyway.”

“I know, right,” said Chad with a snicker “That lousy document report. Who put that together, Hellen Keller? With Daredevil’s help?”

“Don’t forget Stevie Wonder,” Trent said and high-fived Chad.

“If you don’t both shut up,” Michael snapped. “I’m going to fire you.”

They fell silent but I wasn’t about to hold my tongue.

“Your evidence, such as it is, is purely circumstantial, Michael.” I put my hands on my hips and glared at him. “It’s flimsy and you know it.”

“This isn’t a court of law, Jenna.” His eyes grew narrow and angry. “It’s business, and it has its own set of rules that we have to play by. Sometimes you have to make decisions based on your gut instincts when there’s little evidence to go on.”

“Oh, so as long as you have a gut feeling, it’s going to be alright?” I scoffed. “Sure, let’s put all of the company’s revenue into buying Blockbuster video stock. I’m sure that investment will pay off in the end. I have a ‘gut feeling’ about it, don’t you know?”

“You don’t have to be rude,” Michael snapped.

“Michael, you’re the poster child for being rude and yelling at people at these kinds of meetings,” I growled. I was mad and getting madder by the moment. “And besides, your people were the ones being disruptive and rude.”

Michael arched his eyebrows at me.

“Oh? My people weren’t the ones throwing furniture through the air and acting like tough guys. And not only that, but I got my people in line. How about you? Not a word of recrimination for the chair thrower?”

“Oh please, Michael, he didn’t throw the damn chair, he stood up and it fell over. Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Drama? You’re the one who’s creating all of this drama, Jenna.”

“And just by what twisted logic did you come to that conclusion, Michael?”

The other team members just kind of sat there looking worried. I guess it was a bit like Mom and Dad fighting. Except that Dad had three little suck-ups eating up every word he dished out and hissing at me on a figurative level like I was a movie villain every time I opened my mouth.

“You’re the one who won’t accept the simple truth that one of your people is at best horrifically incompetent at keeping their mouths shut, or at worst trying to actively sabotage this very lucrative merger.”

“Evidence, Michael?” I demanded, crossing my arms over my chest.

He loomed large over the desk, his eyes narrowed to dark slits. As hard and as impregnable as gemstones, beautiful but offering no comfort. I didn’t ask for any quarter, though, and none was given.

“I don’t need to present evidence,” he said. “I know what I know. The mole is not from my team. He or she must be on your team. Period, end of story.”

“You can say that all you want. Period, end of story,” I sneered. “You seem to forget this is a merger, Michael. It’s a merger. Two parts coming together to form a greater whole.

You can't do that if one of the parts thinks it's infallible and gobbles up everything in sight."

Michael threw his hands up in the air, a big vein pulsing at his temple.

"Jenna, you drive me crazy, do you know that?" he rudely gestured at his own people. "I know that none of these stuffed shirt sycophants is the mole. None of them has the spine for it. Why do you think I chose them?"

He turned to Blake, Chad, and Trent, who all looked like kicked dogs.

"Don't sulk," he snapped. "Sure, you're all talented at your jobs, but you were chosen because you obey. Period."

He looked at me and scowled.

"End of story."

Oh, he just had to say that didn't he? He just had to try and rub salt into an open wound.

"You think that because I chose a knowledgeable, experienced team, and you chose a bunch of suck-ups that you're somehow a better leader than I am?" I sputtered.

"There are many reasons why I'm a better leader than you are, Jenna," he said matter-of-factly. It irked me even more that he said it that way, and he knew that. He was being cruel again. "I don't have time to list them all. We would need a whole week of meetings to do that."

"Go to hell, Michael," I said, my voice wavering a bit but my resolve holding firm. "You don't know for certain it's someone on my team. Like you said, you would have the

authorities involved if you did have evidence. All you have is supposition.”

“Enough,” Michael snapped. “It can’t be my team. I know how to lead people, and you clearly do not.””

I felt as if I’d been slapped. I think I’d have preferred a slap to how much his words hurt.

“You are not competent,” he said, again grinding salt into my fresh wounds. “You failed me again and again. I’m done with you.”

His face grew as impregnable as stone.

“I’m going to ask Evan to replace you.”

Chapter Twenty

Jenna

“Puppies!”

Damon squirmed in my arms as I entered the grand manor where my friend Jennifer now lived. She’d married the ultra-wealthy Marshall Lane, after some bumps along the way.

“Can I go play with the puppies, Mom?” Damon squealed.

“Can I? Can I please?”

“Well, okay, but don’t hurt them. Remember they’re just babies.”

“Okay, I’ll be careful, Mom, I promise.”

I set Damon down and he raced over to a corralled-off area where a group of fluffy white puppies yipped and yapped at each other. Two of them pulled on either side of a worn-out scarf, riddled with tooth marks. Damon stepped over the barricade and bent over to pet one of the puppies. The puppy got up on its hind legs for a moment, putting its front paws on Damon’s knee.

I had to look away before my heart melted. This baby shower was invitation only. My child was probably safer here than he would have been in Fort Knox. Like I said, I was more worried about the puppies than I was about Damon.

It did give me a chance to sort of absorb the ambiance on my own. Jennifer had done well for herself. Originally she had

worked as a dishwasher until Marshall bought the restaurant she worked at.

Then, through a series of convoluted events, they made a wager. She would take over managership of one of the startups Marshall owed. He wagered she would fail because she didn't have what it took, while she wagered it would be easy because she thought the boss just sat around on his butt yelling at people.

They met somewhere in the middle. I'm not sure who won the wager if anyone. Things got super complicated like they almost always do.

At the end of the day, Jennifer decided that she didn't want to manage a company. She wanted to do something that made a difference in the world. Thus, she founded a multinational charity which sought to preserve the Amazon Rainforest. My boss got involved with the charity at some point and that's how I met Jennifer.

I heard the sounds of laughter coming from the next room. I moved through a gallery with richly carpeted floors, the walls adorned by tasteful but chic works of watercolor art. A group of flowers sitting by a pond reminded me of a lonely woman waiting for her lover for some reason.

I stepped out of the dark gallery and into brighter light. I squinted in the sudden brightness. As my vision adjusted, I spotted Jennifer herself, standing next to her friends Ramone and Jake. Ramone was a fifty-something family man, and looked every bit of it. Jake meanwhile looked and dressed like a college kid even though he was in his thirties.

Both of them had worked with Jennifer at the restaurant. When she moved on to the charity she brought the two of them with her.

“Hey, girlfriend,” Jennifer said.

I hugged her, being careful because of her baby bump.

“Hey yourself,” I said. “How’s the baby?”

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

“I cannot wait to get this parasite out of me. I want to drink a margarita so fucking bad right now.”

We all laughed, and she rubbed her hands on her stomach. I helped myself to a crab cake because Ramone insisted they were absolutely to die for.

Marshall approached us, stowing his phone in his back pocket as he drew near. His wife gave him a long glare.

“Don’t even pretend like you weren’t networking at our baby shower,” she said admonishingly.

Marshall laughed and took her in his arms.

“I’m all yours for the rest of the evening, I promise.”

“You’d better be. Otherwise, I’ll do what I did at our engagement party.”

I looked over at Ramone.

“I must have missed that moment. What happened at the engagement party?”

Ramone’s eyes sparkled as he told the story.

“Oh, nothing much. Except that your boy didn’t stop texting on his phone so Jennifer tossed it into a full fish tank.”

I burst into laughter as Jennifer shrugged.

“I did warn him I was going to throw his phone in the fish tank. I don’t think he took me seriously.”

“Not seriously enough,” Marshall admitted. “Did you have to throw it in Livingston’s tank, though?”

“Livingston?” I blinked.

“The lionfish,” Jennifer said. “Very beautiful but covered in razor-sharp spines and highly venomous.”

“No way was I reaching into that tank to get my phone back,” Marshall said.

I worked my way over to the champagne table. Unlike poor Jennifer, I wasn’t pregnant. I helped myself to an effervescent glass of the bubbly and mingled with the other guests.

I spotted Amanda, Evan’s wife. She waved at me but she seemed slightly troubled.

Amanda joined me at the champagne table, and after a moment Jennifer came over as well. I realized then that I had the ears of two women who had married extremely wealthy men. They might be able to offer me more insight into how to handle being with Michael, if that was what I really wanted.

“How do you guys do it?” I asked.

“Do what?” Amanda asked.

“Oh, it’s really quite easy,” Jennifer said. “I just kind of float through life. By the way, what the hell are you talking about?”

I grinned at her quip, but it soon faded from my face, replaced by a somber frown.

“I mean, how do you handle being married to men who are so totally focused on business? I mean, you can’t throw their phones in the fish tank all of the time, can you?”

“Why not?” Jennifer said with a giggle.

Amanda laughed as well, but she grew more serious as she turned to face me directly.

“In all seriousness, there is no handling. You don’t really do anything, you just accept that this is who they are and how they are going to be.”

“You mean, you just put up with their bullshit?”

“No,” they both said at the same time. They looked at each other and laughed.

“Jinx,” Amanda said. Then she turned back to me. “The truth of the matter is, part of the reason we love our men is because they are so driven and passionate about what they do.”

“You don’t have to knuckle under,” Jennifer said. “In fact, you can’t bend to them like they expect everyone else to. At the same time, you don’t want to fight against their nature. If you really love the tiger, you have to let it prowl the jungle in a metaphorical sense.”

“If you do it right,” Amanda added, “then they’ll see that they really are stronger with you than without you.”

I mulled this over. It made good sense, of course. These were not stupid women. And yet, I wondered if I could ever really handle being with Michael in the long term. It seemed to me that he was rather set in his ways. Every time I thought that he might be changing, he resorted to his old self.

Only he seemed to think he was different. Maybe things could be different with us too.

Amanda's face lit up as she looked over my shoulder. I found out why a moment later when her husband Evan showed up. I had forgotten Evan was my boss, because while I was around Amanda he just became her husband.

"Hi sweetie," Amanda kissed him, and I think she might have grabbed his derriere as well. If so Evan did a good job of not reacting to it. Or a bad job, from Amanda's point of view.

Evan smiled at his wife, then turned his somber expression toward me.

"I'm sorry, I need to borrow Jenna for a moment. I hope you won't mind."

Amanda put her hands on her hips.

"You are not going to talk business with her, are you? This is supposed to be a baby shower, not a boardroom."

"It's all right, girlfriend," Jennifer said with a dismissive wave. "I'm not offended. Besides, look around you. There are so many high-powered business people here, I wouldn't be surprised if there are dozens of deals being made as we speak. It's just the way it is. Goes with the territory."

I allowed Evan to steer me away from the main party. We took refuge as it was inside of the semi-dark gallery. The dark lighting cast heavy shadows over Evan's face, making him look even more extreme and dramatic.

"Jenna, what's going on with you and Michael?"

I felt my belly drop out. I had been expecting this conversation, though I had not exactly been looking forward to it.

“I guess he’s talked to you, huh?”

“You’re damn right he’s talked to me.” Evan’s face drew into a scowl. “Sometimes I really think that guy is a jerk. He wants me to replace you as team leader of the merger. In point of fact, he wants to be the replacement and lead both teams.”

“He what?” I was flabbergasted. “Why would he do that?”

“For a lot of reasons. One of which is that Michael likes to handle things on his own. A foible I have been all too familiar with in the past. For another thing, I think you mystify him.”

“Mystify him?” I asked.

Evan nodded. “You won’t just roll over and do what he wants. For a guy like him that makes you fascinating. Probably also frustrating.”

I sighed. “He keeps harping on this idea that the leak came from my team. I don’t know, I guess it’s possible, though it doesn’t seem likely to me. It’s not the idea that I might have a mole on my team. It’s the way that Michael’s been acting about it that’s got me upset.”

I cleared my throat and looked up at Evan. I sighed, deflating and letting out a bit of the tension I’d been building up.

“Look, Evan, I know how much this deal means to you, and not just the money aspect of it. You’re trying to build your legacy. If you need to keep Michael happy, I understand—”

“Quite frankly, I don’t care what he wants,” Evan snapped. “He’s had no right to talk to you or treat you the way that he has.”

“But what if he tries to call off the deal?” I asked.

“He won’t do that. He’s much too invested in the deal at this point.” His eyes flicked over to me. “What I do care about is, how do you feel? Do you want to keep going as the team lead on this merger? It’s up to you, Jenna.”

“You’re leaving it up to me?” I asked incredulously. “Even after all of Michael’s posturing?”

“I already explained why I’m not going to sweat Michael’s moodiness. Do you want this, Jenna?”

I thought about it, and thought about it hard. I was torn between two wants, between two worlds. On the one hand, I felt as if Michael and I needed to try the relationship thing again. I damn sure needed to tell Michael that he was Damon’s father.

The whole damn merger thing squatted between us like an ugly spider, though. I didn’t know what to do about it.

“Evan, I...”

I decided I just couldn’t handle it any longer. In a moment of weakness, I gave voice to my weariness.

“I just can’t do this anymore...”

“It’s all right.” Evan clapped a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll handle things, no problem.”

He went off and I sighed heavily. I was relieved, but... I felt like it wasn’t the ending I needed or wanted.

I wandered over to where Damon still played with the puppies. Damon turned to me and beamed a smile.

“Look, Mom,” he said. “This is Inky, Minky, Moe, Blinky, and Clyde.”

He named each of the puppies. I laughed and shook my head.

“I can’t tell them apart, buddy.”

“I can,” he said. “Look, I colored the tips of their tails with magic marker. Clyde is blue, Moe is Pink, see?”

I started to say something about how he shouldn’t be drawing on someone else’s puppies when an idea sparked in my brain. My mouth dropped open, and my mind raced through the possibilities. Yes, yes, it just might work.

“I love you so much, Damon. You just gave me an idea.” I hugged and kissed him. “Mommy will be back. Have fun with your puppies... and don’t draw on them anymore.”

I tracked down Evan at the hors d’oeuvres table.

“Forget what I said before. I’m back in the game.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Jenna

I stood at the top of a twisted, hollow skyscraper. I'd been inside of this building a few times before and always found it fascinating as far as architecture goes.

The hollowed-out design meant the lobby was fifty stories tall. I could look down and see the ground floor from where I stood. Pod-shaped elevators, decorated with industrial-style light bulbs, moved up and down in a never-ending dance.

If I thought about it, I could almost pretend I was in some sort of futuristic sci-fi setting. But I didn't need the escapism of fantasy on that day. No, I was riding the waves of a different kind of euphoria altogether.

The atrium combined with the glass walls of the elevators meant I could pretty much see everyone as they came and went on all of the floors, including my own. There was a reason that I had picked that particular vantage point to have my scheduled meeting.

Speaking of which, I noticed Michael enter the lobby far below. I could tell it was him by the way he walked, even though I couldn't actually make out his facial features from that far away.

He stalked across the lobby floor, entering one of the capsule-shaped elevators. I watched as he rode the elevator up, making a stop here and there along the way. A grin came to

my lips, because Michael seemed to have some idea he was being watched. He kept looking all around, everywhere but up at where I perched on my raptor's limb.

The elevator let him off on the top floor with me. He almost walked right past the little peninsula I stood upon. I waved at him, and his gaze swiveled over to land upon me.

Michael wore a confused expression as he walked toward me.

"Jenna? What are you doing here instead of Evan? He sent me a text that there was an important, life or death matter regarding the merger."

"Evan didn't lie to you," I said. I gestured at the chair opposite my own. "Sit down, Michael."

"Sit down?" he scowled. "No, I will not sit down. This is intolerable. I told Evan I would no longer work with someone as incompetent as you have proven yourself to be. I will not participate in this... are you eating popcorn?"

"Why, as a matter of fact, I am eating popcorn." I held the bag out to him, munching away even as I spoke. "Bite?"

He opened his mouth to protest, and I gestured at the chair again.

"Sit down, Michael. Relax and take a load off for a spell. You're just in time for the show."

"The show?" Michael shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. "No dice, Jenna. I don't know what you're playing at here, but I have no time for games. Not with a billion dollars at stake with the NonPoint and Leisure Unlimited merger. You must be out of your mind if you think I want to play along with... whatever this is."

He gestured vaguely at me and my popcorn.

“We need to resolve this situation with the mole and saboteur. And since you are incapable of helping me, Jenna, I must do this task by myself.”

“Oh yeah?” I chewed a mouthful of popcorn and swallowed it. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” he said stubbornly. “It is so.”

“Huh. How’s that working out for you again?”

His face darkened, but he didn’t speak. I grinned around my delicious repast.

“You, uh, you got your suspect in custody yet? No? Uncover any evidence or, God forbid, proof? Hmm. Curious, most curious.”

“Jenna, will you please get to the point?” Michael growled. “I don’t like being strung along like this.”

“All I’m saying is, it doesn’t seem to be working out for you very well at all so far.”

He opened his mouth, but I noticed furtive movement below. I held up my hand in front of his face.

“Shh, quiet,” I said. “The show is just about to begin.”

I pointed down at the entrance. A group of people entered the building as a unit. Many of them wore dark blue uniforms, and they formed a ring around those in gray and tan suits.

“Who the hell is that?” Michael asked.

“It looks to me like New York’s finest, and I’d say that the guys in the suits are with the IRS.”

“The IRS?” Michael looked at me in shocked disbelief. “I can get how you ID’d the cops, but how do you know the other ones work for the IRS? Maybe they’re FBI or something?”

“Oh, call it a lucky guess,” I said cryptically.

The group of cops and agents entered the elevator. Michael was utterly flabbergasted. He swept a hand up his face and pulled his hair back until I could see his scalp.

“What in the hell is going on?” he murmured.

“Oh, the IRS is here to investigate an anonymous tip about documents. Specific documents which happen to contain information about tax fraud.”

“Jenna, this is my building,” he said. “You must be out of your mind. We have to stop them.”

I grabbed his sleeve and held him back.

“No, Michael. We want them to find the documents.”

“We want them to find... I don’t commit tax fraud, how is there even a document that details the ways in which I have done it?”

“Well, because I spent a whole lot of time, effort, and energy forging one, that’s why?”

Michael looked at me as if I had grown a second head.

“I’m not often completely confused, but I admit I have no idea what the fuck you are talking about, Jenna. Would you please tell me what the hell is going on?”

“I made six identical financial reports that imply our company is engaged in a rather twisted tax fraud scheme. Then I gave them to each member of our respective teams.”

“What are you saying, Jenna?”

I turned to him with a grin.

“I’m saying that those loyal to us are going to try and solve this situation internally. The one person who is *not* loyal, however...”

Michael gasped.

“Now you’re getting it,” I said, patting his shoulder.

“You wanted the mole to leak the files,” he said. “So they would flush themselves out of hiding.”

“Something like that.”

“Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but how will you know which of the team members betrayed us, if they all got the same reports?”

“Oh, I thought of that,” I said with a chuckle. “And I owe it all to a moment of insight which stemmed from my son coloring puppy dog tails with magic marker.”

Michael looked just as confused at that remark as you would expect anyone to.

“You see, I told each team member they have an urgent meeting where they are supposed to bring that incriminating report.” I chuckled at my own cleverness. “Only, I told them each to go to a different floor.”

“What does this mean for us?”

“Well, I picked this spot because we can see the elevators clearly and take note of which floors they stop at.”

“There are six people waiting in six different rooms on six different floors, aren’t there?” he said with his mouth open in awe.

I grinned ear to ear.

“You bet your sweet ass that’s what’s going down. Only one of the people I gave the fake report to was the mole. Therefore, the cops will be going to one and only one location in this building.”

The cops stopped at the fourteenth floor and got out. I watched without surprise as they went around the corner and disappeared down a hallway.

“This floor has a member of my team,” I said simply. Michael looked at me sharply, then nodded.

“You see, Jenna? I was right all along. It was a member of your team.”

“Keep watching,” I said. “And take notice of the elevator. Do you notice anything... unusual about it, Michael?”

He frowned and looked back at the glass, lighted elevator car. His mouth gaped open when he saw what I wanted him to see.

“The rest of the cops and agents are still going up,” he said.

“You got it,” I said cheerfully. “Gold star for you, Michael.”

The elevator reached the twenty-eighth floor, and the rest of the agents swarmed off.

“Just for your information,” I said with exaggerated casualness, just to irk Michael a little more. “This is the floor where one of your team members is expected to be.”

“I don’t understand.” Michael shook his head. “There are two moles?”

“I kind of suspected this,” I said. “Though I didn’t think I would turn out to be right. It turns out that there were moles on both of our teams. We were both compromised, Michael. What do you think of that? This explains the leaks, the stolen documents from your safe, the botched report and anonymous tips to IRS.”

He fell silent for a long time, staring at the elevators as they went up and down. At length I spoke.

“So, do you think you can take care of the moles now? Now that I’ve pointed them out to you?”

He turned to me and nodded.

“Yes, I can handle it now. I *will* handle it now,” he said, eyes growing dark. Then his expression softened a great deal and he faced me once again.

“But before I deal with those traitors and saboteurs, there’s one thing I must take care of first. It’s vitally important.”

“What is that?” I asked. “I would have thought you’d be itching to pull the trigger on catching the moles.”

“There is something more important than that. I must apologize to you.”

I did a double-take. Then I pinched my arm, hard, and yelped.

“What are you doing?” Michael asked.

“I’m pinching myself to see if I’m dreaming. Michael Wallace, apologize? Never, not in a million years.”

I shook my head in disbelief.

“In fact, Michael, have you ever apologized to anyone in your entire life before this moment?”

“I don’t know,” he said, and I believed him. “I’m sure I’ve apologized at some point or another. But it has been a very long time. But you deserve my apology, Jenna. I’m sorry.”

He took my hands and looked deep into my eyes.

“I’m truly sorry, from the bottom of my heart.”

“Okay, apologies are good,” I said, still reeling from this sudden unexpected development. “But normally, people tell you what they’re apologizing for.”

“I’m sorry for so many things, Jenna. I’m sorry that I was wrong and you were right and I wouldn’t admit it.”

My jaw fell open. He was actually going through with it, he was actually apologizing. And he was just getting started.

“I’m sorry I ever thought you were incompetent,” he went on. “And I’m sorry that I didn’t recognize how brilliant you really are until it was too late. I’m sorry that I ever let you go five years ago, I’m sorry for not trusting you... I’m sorry for everything.”

I opened my mouth, closed it, and then shook my head. I kept looking in the sky to see if a meteor was about to hit, because surely this was the end of the world. I had dreamed of Michael saying something like that to me, but never dared to hope it would actually happen.

“Michael,” I said, shaking my head. “I... I don’t know how I should respond, I... this is so overwhelming—”

And with that, he kissed me, stealing away my words and my breath. And maybe, my heart.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jenna

They say that all's well that ends well.

The bad actors had been identified and dealt with. It turned out Polnaraff and Trent were both working for different unnamed entities trying to sabotage us. They didn't even know about each other.

The merger was all but a done deal. All that remained was for the final meeting where we would sign the documents and it would be official.

I walked into the lobby, Damon tightly gripping my hand. He couldn't wait to ride in the glass-walled elevators. We stepped onto the express and rode all the way to the top.

"Mom, can we get ice cream?" Damon asked.

"Of course we can," I said. "In fact, being as the big merger is about to go through, I think ice cream might be mandatory."

"Mandatory?" Damon asked.

I squatted down in front of him and straightened his jacket.

"It means it has to happen."

"So we have to have ice cream?" his mouth was a big O while he digested this particular nuance of our culture. "I wish it was *mandy torry* to have ice cream every day."

I laughed, and led him into the lobby of Michael's main office. Sherry, his secretary, looked up and smiled at us as we entered.

"Just hang out and color in here," I said to Damon. "And don't give Miss Sherry any trouble. I'll be right back. I just have to take care of some business."

"You're going to sign the merger?"

I nodded, then kissed him on top of his head.

"I'm going to draw me and you, and Michael too," Damon said as he whipped out his Crayola pack.

With that, I headed through the second door and into his office proper.

The scene on the inside was a stark contrast to the first press conference I'd hastily arranged after the merger leak. This time, there were only a handful of hand-picked journalists present, and less of a circus atmosphere.

No DJs, no colored lights. After all the fanfare involved with the merger, including several raids by the IRS and an act of theft and corporate espionage, we all agreed that the shareholders needed some assurance that things would return to normalcy.

We wanted to project an air of stability and harmony. Thus. Evan Jones, my boss, and Michael, my... what? Boyfriend? Baby Daddy? We would have to sort that out soon, but first I had some major news to drop on Michael.

Anyway, both of them wore their most conservative, simply tailored suits. The only bling on display were their Rolex

watches as they each took a turn ceremonially going over the contract.

I hung in the back. I wasn't part of the show, and I didn't want to be. I preferred it right where I was. That way nobody could see how worried I was about Damon. I didn't know how the little guy was going to take learning Michael was his real father.

I also fretted over something else, something more palpable and immediate. As soon as those two powerhouses put ink to paper, the merger was a done deal. That meant my job, at least as it pertained to this particular assignment, was concluded.

No more working with Michael. That meant no more excuses to postpone telling him about Damon. I just had to bite the bullet and do it. I had to tell him that Damon was in fact his son.

As much as I worried about how Damon would react, I worried double that for Michael. Michael really gave a lot of signs that he had changed, deeply, profoundly. It made me think he might be ready for fatherhood now.

On the other hand, I didn't know if he would be angry with me or not. For not telling him about Damon a lot sooner. Some men might take that as a reason to be cold and wrathful. Michael sure would have back in the day, but what about now?

I still felt the deep pangs of guilt over withholding the information for so long. I didn't think I would ever really absolve myself of that.

Evan picked up the ceremonial silver pen and looked into the cameras. I could tell from the look on his face he was about to give one of his meticulously rehearsed speeches. Evan didn't like leaving things to chance.

"Before I sign this document and make history with my esteemed colleague Michael Wallace," Evan gestured at him and Michael smiled "I just wanted to say a few things about how this all came together."

He set the pen down and I knew he was about to be long-winded.

"A lot of people have asked me what the secret of my success is. At the end of the day, it's about surrounding yourself with the right people. The people who worked for this merger are the same people you see every day. They're not overpaid idiots like me."

A smattering of laughter went through the small gaggle of press.

"They're the people you see in the grocery store, or at the soccer game cheering their kid on. They're the hard-working people who made this merger possible. It would never have happened without our committed team doing their best to make our endeavor an unmitigated success."

I caught Michael looking at me. I pretended to fall asleep, as if Evan's speech was boring me, and he snickered.

"...and in closing, that's why my cousin Jared says never wear waders to go spearfishing."

More laughter, so I must have missed something. Evan finally signed on the dotted line, then handed the pen over to

Michael.

“You know, Evan... great speech by the way. How about a hand for this guy? Huh? Nobody can give speeches like this man.”

Polite applause rattled out into a din.

“Too bad he’s full of shit.”

The applause stopped and was followed by laughter.

“No offense, Evan, but we don’t have a bunch of people to thank for this merger. We really only need to thank one person, who really made it all happen and come together.”

Here it comes, I thought. He’s going to say it’s himself.

Then Michael pointed me out in the rear of the room.

“Jenna.”

All eyes turned on me, and more polite applause splashed through the room. My cheeks turned bright red.

“Without her brilliance and competence, none of us would be standing here today,” Michael said, his eyes shining as he looked right at me.

Michael signed the paper, and then he and Evan shook hands. Evan turned back to the podium and smiled.

“Everyone is invited to the celebration this evening at the Mercury Hotel. Just me and a few hundred of my closest friends.”

More laughter, but I wasn’t in the mood for mirth. Right then all I cared about was getting to Michael and telling him, finally telling him the truth. It beat at my mind like a caged

bird desperate to be free. If I didn't let it out soon it was going to drive me mad.

Everyone filtered out of the room but for the two of us. Michael snapped his briefcase shut and looked up at me with a smile.

“So,” he said. “You look like you have something on your mind.”

“Yes, I do,” I said.

Michael turned around and encircled his arms around my waist. I didn't resist when he brought me in for a kiss. His lips were like fire on my own. My heart started racing, but I remembered my purpose.

“Look, Michael,” I said, pushing away from him slightly, enough that he could no longer kiss me though his arms remained around me. “There's something I want to talk about. You remember the night you broke up with me? Well, there was something I—”

“Shh,” he said, kissing my neck. His lips moved across my skin like magic. I gasped, no longer pushing him away but pulling me into him. “Don't worry about the past. Let's just worry about the present. You and me...”

He mumbled something dirty into my flesh. I felt a strong tingle spread from my clit like a many-pointed star expanding inside of me. I knew I couldn't resist. I was ready to go.

I was just going to have to say it before I couldn't talk, other than moans and screams.

“Damon is your son,” I gasped as his tongue made my skin feel amazing.

Michael stopped cold. He looked up at me, his arms slipping away from my body to hang limply at his side. I see a lot of things go through his eyes. Shock. Disbelief. Betrayal. Hurt. Joy. Sadness.

“Look, Michael,” I said with a sigh. “if I could just explain why—”

“Stop,” he said simply, in a soft but certain tone.

I closed my mouth and waited. What was he going to say to me? What was he going to do? My heart beat so fast I was afraid it was going to explode. I’d dreamed of this moment coming someday, and fantasized about all the different ways it could go, good or bad. Now that the moment was here, I was terrified anyway.

“Jenna,” he said softly. “I understand.”

I almost collapsed with relief.

“You’re really not mad?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I mean, I have to remember what things were like back then. What I was like back then.”

He reached up and stroked his hand across my cheek. The gentle touch made me melt into his arms.

“Honestly, if you’d told me back then, I don’t think it would have gone very well.” His brows came together and his jaw set hard. “I was a mean bastard. If you’d told me you were pregnant, I would have thought you were trying to extort me for money. Or maybe I would have thought you were lying about being pregnant and shunned you.”

He heaved a long sigh, and I saw something rare come to his eyes. Regret.

“I’m sorry I was like that. I’m sorry for all the time we lost.” His voice choked up for a moment. “We could have had five years together. Five years, I could have watched my son grow. And that’s my fault for being a cruel bastard.”

I hugged him tight. I was sorry for all that time we could have had, too.

“Michael,” I said into his chest. “There’s no point beating yourself up about it. Those five years are gone, they’re spent.”

“Yes, but I could be there for the next five years, and beyond,” Michael said softly, his thumb caressing my lower lip for a moment. “If you’ll allow me back into your and Damon’s lives.”

I pulled away so I could look him in the eyes.

“Oh, honey,” I said with a sigh. “I’ve been waiting so long to hear you say that. I used to dream you would do this. Be accountable, open, and loving.”

“I do love you, Jenna.”

My heart skipped a beat, and he kissed me. His kiss lingered, and I held him tight as if I never wanted to let him go.

“Yes,” I said when we finally came up for air.

Michael grinned and then he did something he’d never done before, ever. He took my hand and held it as we walked out the door.

We came out into the waiting room and Damon looked up. His little eyes darted to our conjoined hands, and then his face broke into a grin.

“Does this mean I can call Daddy Daddy now?”

My mouth gaped open. There was no way he could have known... I had been so careful to keep it from him.

He knew what he knew, I supposed. Damon ran over and hugged both of our legs, and my heart soared.

“I love you both,” Michael said.

“I love you, too.”

He kissed me again, and then the three of us went out for ice cream.

Epilogue

Jenna

The clink of champagne glasses carried above the general murmur of restaurant din as I strode into Viviani's Italian Restaurant. A string quartet played a lively but mild concerto somewhere I could not see. My mind drifted back to the last time I'd been in this very same restaurant.

What a disaster that had been. Worst date ever, but then again, it did sort of bring Michael and I back together...or did it? He hadn't even recognized me at the time.

This time was quite a bit different. It had been some six months since the merger had been signed, sealed, and delivered. When I came into the restaurant this time, I was not coming in to meet with some lame guy I'd swiped right on.

The hostess met me at the door, beaming a smile.

"Welcome back, ma'am. I assume you're here to meet up with your date?"

"Oh yes," I said. "He's very handsome, about three and a half feet tall, and his shoelaces are probably untied. Do you know of anyone like that?"

A playful smile spread across her impish cheeks.

"Why, yes, I know just the man. You're right, he's a real heartbreaker. He drew a picture of his father handing me a big tip...oh..."

Her hand flew up in front of her mouth with a quick gasp.

“I’m so sorry, I should not have assumed that was his father. Ah, is that his father?”

I smiled and let her off the hook.

“Yes, that is his father.”

“I knew it. I mean, sometimes you can just tell, you know?” The hostess leaned in close to me and whispered in a conspiratorial tone. “Your husband thinks the world of that kid, just so you know.”

I smiled, even though it sort of stung that she assumed he was my husband. I didn’t correct her, though. The truth was, it sure felt like Michael, Damon, and I were a family. I kept telling myself that it didn’t bother me that we hadn’t made it official as of yet.

Except that maybe it kind of did make me feel bad on some level. I hadn’t brought it up yet, but it sure would have gotten my mother off of my back if you catch my meaning.

The hostess led me up to the VIP section, that raised gazebo-like structure that looked down on the rest of the restaurant lobby. I heard a giggle as I came up the steps. The hostess and I were greeted by the sight of Michael and Damon both trying to see who could balance a spoon on their noses the longest.

Michael saw us and flinched, and the spoon clattered to the table.

“Ha, I win!” Damon said. Then his eyes darted to me. “Mommy!”

He ran over and hugged my legs. The hostess left us while Michael pulled my chair out for me.

“Here you are, my sweet,” he said. He stole a kiss as I settled into my chair.

“Have you guys ordered yet?” I asked as I spread my napkin out on my lap.

“No, we haven’t been here very long ourselves,” Michael said. “I picked him up from karate class not so long ago. He wanted to wear his Gi to the restaurant but I told him you wouldn’t like that very much.

“I probably wouldn’t have minded. I mean, it’s not like the owner is going to kick us out for not meeting the dress code, now is it?”

He laughed. “No, we have an in with the owner.”

“How’s karate class going?” I asked Damon, but he was coloring with his crayons and didn’t look up.

“Fine,” he said in reply.

“He’s about to get his, ah...tangerine belt? Orange? One of those citrus colors,” Michael said.

“Yellow belt, Daddy,” Damon said without looking up, with a veneer of exasperation as if his father should have known better.

I liked being at the restaurant with the three of them. It made me feel cozy and warm. It was like we were a real family. We came a long, long way to be here together. Me, my son, and my son’s father. All together at last.

Damon looked up at his father suddenly.

“Is it time, Daddy?”

“No, not yet, we haven’t even tried the first course yet.”

I cocked an eyebrow over the menu I held spread out in my hands. “Time for what?”

“Time for dessert,” Michael said, smiling at Damon. “Isn’t that right buddy?”

Damon looked confused. “Huh?”

Then his eyes widened.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. We’re not up to nothing or trying to trick you, Mommy.”

I stifled a laugh and gave Michael a look. To his credit, he appeared totally innocent.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into the kid,” Michael said with a shrug.

“Bull…” I looked over at Damon. “Baloney. You’ve got a twinkle in your eye. You’re up to something, I can tell.”

I started to worry that he’d gotten my birthday wrong or something. Or maybe there was a prank at work. One of those clip-show things, maybe.

Perhaps in an attempt to distract my already suspicious mind, Michael started in on another subject.

“So how was work, dear?”

“Oh work was fine. Tough, but fine.” I shook my head as I recalled a particularly long and difficult phone call with a vendor. “Evan keeps handing more and more of the day-to-

day operations over to me so he can spend more time with the charity, not to mention his family.”

“Well, that’s because he knows you can handle it. There’s nothing wrong with you being late for dinner because of work for a change. I do it all the time.”

“Not really, Michael. You do a great job of being there for all of us.”

Our food arrived at last. I had shrimp primavera for my main course, while Damon had mac and cheese and Michael stuck to type and ordered chicken parm. The food was excellent as always, but the longer the dinner went on the more suspicious and giggly my son and his father became.

The dessert course came out and I wondered if perhaps I was being paranoid. Maybe they were just giggly because they were having a good time, and not because they were up to something.

Just as I was admonishing myself silently, the string quartet changed to something lively. I thought it was Orpheus in the Underworld, but I wasn’t sure. Damon’s eyes grew wide as dinner plates.

He dove into his pocket and fished around frantically.

“No, Damon,” Michael said. “This isn’t the right song, not yet!”

It was like the immovable object meeting the irresistible force, and the irresistible force won out. Damon was too far gone in his task to stop now. With a cry of triumph, he dragged out a small black box from his pocket and slapped it on the tabletop so hard the glasses rattled.

“I found it!”

My heart caught in my throat as I looked at the little jewelry box. Michael laughed helplessly and spread his hands out wide.

“They were supposed to play ‘Baby I Love Your Ways’ when Damon opened the box.”

I sniffled a little bit.

“You think I care about that?” I said, my voice breaking.

“Here Mommy,” Damon said, opening the box up to reveal a gorgeous diamond set in a white gold ring with etched filigree. “Mommy, will you please marry Daddy?”

I broke down, I couldn’t help it. I folded my hands over my mouth and nose and wept as I stared at the ring.

“Oh no, she’s crying,” Damon said. “Why is Mommy crying, Daddy? You said she would be happy.”

“I am happy,” I said between sniffles. I hugged him tight. “I am happy, sweetie. Sometimes grown-ups cry because they’re happy.”

“Is this one of those times?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” I said, looking Michael in the eye. “This is one of those times.”

Michael grinned, and then arched his brows.

“You still haven’t given your answer yet.”

I grinned back.

“Yes, of course I’ll marry Daddy.”

...

The story of Jenna and Michael doesn't have to end here.

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of their happy family.*

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length novel.*

Meet Jon, the Billionaire

Chapter One

Jonathon

Johnny “Acme” Malone was one crazy cat. He went and put up his office building on reclaimed land in lower Manhattan and made it a skyscraper to boot. I stood at the foot of said skyscraper, the house that Acme built, and felt a mix of sensations.

First, and foremost, I felt a little bit of awe. The Acme building had been a staple of the skyline since my childhood, and I’d often wondered what it would be like to stand on the roof and look out at the city below.

Second, a sense of triumph washed over me. It had taken months of effort, but I’d finally done it. Now I was ready to strut inside like a conqueror.

But you know what I remember the most about that morning, the morning when it all started? Feeling kind of empty. I know, crazy, right? That a billionaire investor with six-pack abs and a garage full of overpriced Italian sports cars would feel empty? But that feeling was there, even if it was buried so deep I didn’t notice it on a conscious level.

A police car shot past, its sirens wailing, snapping me out of my reverie. I strode through the sliding glass doors of the Acme Building and entered the finely appointed lobby. Finely

appointed except for one thing; the garish Acme Ace, a talking slice of bread that was the Acme brand mascot. It was just an eyesore, in every sense of the word.

Acme's headquarters buzzed like a kicked beehive. People were rushing to and fro, some of them carrying boxes of paper files. I could understand their consternation, under the circumstances.

I approached the front desk receptionist and put on my best smile. She was a sweet-hipped little curly-haired brunette, and her eyes let me know she appreciated the attention and was returning it tenfold.

"Good morning, and welcome to Acme," she said, her ruby-painted lips parting in a sweet smile. "What may I do to assist you?"

"You can keep me from getting a broken heart, and tell me that you're single," I said with a smile.

She laughed, her lovely face crinkling up. "I'm sort of seeing someone..."

"Seeing him? As in he's your boyfriend..." I checked her name tag "... Tisha?"

"I—sure?"

"You don't sound too sure about that, and even if you were, well... isn't boyfriend, by its very nature, a temporary vocation?"

Sweat broke out on her brow as she tried to pretend she wasn't flattered by my continued salvo. "I suppose that it is."

I decided to get down to business, because sometimes I can get carried away when a pretty woman is involved. “Anyway, Tisha, I’m sorry to take up so much of your time—”

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” she said quickly, her brown eyes lighting up.

“—but I’m afraid I’m late to a meeting with the board of directors.”

Tisha blinked. “Um, I’m sorry, sir, but I personally know all of the board members on sight, and you’re not one of them.”

“Ah, but I will be momentarily.” I dug my phone out of my pocket and swiped the screen to life. I turned the screen so she could see what was displayed upon it. “You see, I’ve just bought this company, and there will be changes.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re Tiger Thomas?”

I chuckled. “I prefer Jonathon, but you, Tisha...”

I gently lifted her chin to look me in the eyes. “... you can call me Tiger if you want to. I promise not to bite... too hard.”

“Sh-should I call the board and tell them that you’re coming?” She stammered, trying to maintain a veneer of self-control. I decided she was a true professional and would not be losing her job. You’ll notice her rejection or acceptance of my numerous offers had nothing to do with her employment status. The Tiger doesn’t roll like that. It’s strictly a meritocracy no matter who’s sleeping with—or not sleeping with—whom.

“No, I’d prefer to surprise them.” I gestured toward the elevator. “This way, top floor, I presume?”

Tisha nodded and watched me all the way to the elevator. I rode up to the top floor, taking in the engraved brass relief of ivy leaves weaving its way around the car's interior. Very classy. I liked it.

I strode into the board meeting, causing every head to turn my way. They recognized me on sight, and thus nobody objected when I walked over and sat down at the head of the table.

“Good morning,” I said with a grin. “My name is Jonathon Thomas, and I'm the new majority owner of Acme Bread.”

After a moment, the flood began. Sycophants tripping over themselves trying to get on my good side. I listened to them patiently, one by one, as they tried to justify their existence.

Once they were finished, I'd spoken to a little more than half the board room—nearly a dozen people. I looked them all in the eye, smiled, and said—

“All of you are fired.”

I then turned my back on them, leaving them to look at each other and then at me back without any awkward pleading or threats. As they shuffled out of the boardroom, I addressed the remaining members.

“Those of you who didn't fall all over yourselves to kiss my ass did so for one of two reasons.” I ticked them off on my fingers. “One, you're pissed off that I took over your company and are thinking of resigning. Or two, you're confident enough in your abilities that you don't feel the need to justify your existence to me. It's the second group I'm

most interested in, because you're the people I want on my team as we take Acme bread even higher."

"We're already the top bread manufacturer and distributor in the world. Our products are sold on every continent on Earth but Antarctica."

I turned to the speaker. Jeff Barnes, the sixtyish hawk-nosed former CEO.

"How are you going to get higher than THAT?" He glared at me as if he'd spoken with the voice of God.

"You make some excellent points, Mr. Barnes." I whipped out my cell phone and opened the other tab I had prepared in advance. "But I measure success not only by volume, but by reputation. Listen to these reviews of your—I'm sorry, of my—products."

I cleared my throat. "The Acme Country White loaf is a fine bread if you have low expectations and no other options... or how about this one? The cardboard backing tastes better than the Acme Swiss Cake Rolls."

I took them in with my gaze. "We're not the name that comes to mind when people think quality. I want to change that perception."

I checked the time. "It's now ten o'clock AM. I want ideas on the table by noon. I'll spring for lunch."

With that, I turned my back and left the board room. I headed back to the elevator and rode it up to the roof access port. There, the Acme Helipad—stupidly embossed with that ridiculous Acme Ace—stretched out before me. Right on cue,

the Huey Sky Limousine chopper descended from the azure skies.

First out of the chopper was Chandler Reece. His mustache and goatee made many people compare him to the Devil—a handsome devil, that is. He straightened his black and white pinstripe suit and made his way down the stairway as the rotors slowed their spin. He was our firm’s Treasurer, but he was far from stingy. He was always willing to loosen the purse strings when one of us had a crazy scheme, mostly because it made him money.

Second out was Mason Wilder. Built like a superhero and a lover of all things granola and surf-related. Our firm’s COO and has more of a lady-killer rep than even me. Well, maybe not, but it’s close.

Last but not least—just ask him, he’ll tell you—Stanley Timmons. He adjusted his wire-rim glasses and looked aloof, but then he was always like that. He was our Chief Executive Data Analyst, and a certified genius. Again, just ask him. He’ll tell you.

“Gentlemen.” I popped the cork on the champagne I’d had chilling and poured them all a glass.

“What’s all of this, now?” Mason asked.

“It’s a celebration of our new acquisition, Acme Breads.”

“During an anti-gluten movement, you bought a bread company?” Mason’s face stretched in horrified shock.

“Relax, Mase,” Timmons said with a grin. “I crunched the numbers. The vast majority of households throughout the world still consume bread. Taking Acme was a smart move.”

“Thanks to our firm’s reputation,” I said, lifting my glass in the air, “shares of Acme have gone up twenty-five percent. We’re already richer, gentlemen.”

“To being already richer,” Mason said, offering a toast which we all took.

The celebration didn’t last long—we were all busy men, after all. I headed back down to the lobby, intent on making good on my offer to provide lunch to the board members who I hadn’t fired.

On my way toward the door, Tisha stopped me.

“Excuse me, Mr. Thomas,” she said, slipping something into my blazer pocket. “I wanted to give you this.”

She smiled at me and walked away, swinging her hips far more than was necessary. I got in my limo and checked my pocket, smiling when I saw a red lip trace on her business card. Nice touch.

Just another day for the Tiger of Wall Street.

Chapter Two

Amelia

This morning I woke up as usual, drank a cup of coffee and went to my aunt’s house.

Most people, when they think about visiting their aunt’s house, they expect to listen to dreary stories, or be forced to play with cousins they’ve never met. Me, when I think back

to visiting my aunt's house, all I can think of is working in the bakery.

I don't mean to make her out to be a slave driver or anything. Working in the bakery was fun with a capital F. I learned all kinds of tricks that I later applied to other aspects of my life. Like bread. Simple product, right? Comes in a plastic wrapper with a little twisty tie thingy on the end. Sold to the general public and consumed usually without little enthusiasm.

Not in my aunt's shop. Bread wasn't treated as just a food staple, and certainly never without enthusiasm. I recall a time when Pedro, long the head baker at Breadcetera, told me that yeast never rises unless you feed them, speak to them—and beat the crap out of them.

When the bakery made bread, it did so with a capital B. I'm talking more than just your standard white-wheat-rye holy trinity. Asiago cheese bread. Italian olive bread. French toast loaf—one of the best sellers, and for good reason, even though it's technically just an ingredient.

“Hello my little yeasties.” Pedro's lips peeled back from a crooked grin as he held the bread pan in his hand. His tone was sweet, as if he were speaking to a tiny kitten. “I'm going to beat the shit out of you!”

He slapped a meaty palm on the side of the pan repeatedly, beating a rapid tattoo as I swept through the kitchen at Breadcetera, a phone up to my ear. Pedro noticed me, and a sheepish look stretched over his wizened face. He beat the pan noticeably softer.

“Okay, Ms. Taylor,” I said as I pushed the swinging aluminum door separating the kitchen and sales counter with my butt. “That was two dozen chocolate banana cupcakes with lemon frosting and the Power Ranger rings.”

“Not Power Ranger, Ninja Turtles.”

“I don’t know if we have—” I tugged a cardboard box filled with kid’s plastic rings and found a package with the pizza-loving reptiles. “Never mind. Ninja Turtles it is.”

I made a notation on my phone, and the message was instantly carried to the computer in the manager’s office. The printouts for the day’s orders would be generated and waiting for us. And it seemed like today they had to wait for a while.

I don’t want to sound like I’m bragging, but my aunt’s bakery was damn popular. Like, that morning, I couldn’t even stop to take a breath. Poor Sascha is an expert cashier, but even she struggled. I saw a line wrapping around the door and knew that we wouldn’t be granted respite any time soon.

My wait staff were mostly college kids, and they were swamped, too. I grabbed a pot of coffee in one hand, and a pot of decaf in the other, and swept through the dozen or so tables we had set up.

“Hey, Mr. Goldstein,” I said, stopping by his table. “Top you off there?”

“Why yes, thank you.” He gestured at the sandwich on his plate. “This Reuben is perfect. Tell Yerkov he’s a national treasure.”

“I’ll tell him.” I smiled and swept on to my next guest. Soon I’d emptied most of my coffee pot and done two refills of

decaf.

“I’m about to quit, Amy,” Sascha said as I came past to start another pot of coffee.

“Hang in there, Sascha.”

“I can’t handle this. You need to get me some help in the mornings. We need two cash registers going on days like this.”

“If we had a place to put one, we’d already have it.”

It was true. Breadcetera was designed to be a mom-and-pop type operation, but its popularity had expanded in recent years. With the glass display counters—crucial to our point-of-sale system—taking up most of the space, we really only had room for one register. To install another one would require a major remodel, and we couldn’t spare an ounce of space from the kitchen or the lobby. Too many people sat down and enjoyed their breakfast for us to eliminate it, and those people who sat down tended to leave with a baked treat, too.

“I want a raise,” she called as I left. I didn’t pay her any mind. I knew that my aunt gave all her staff raises every three months without any of that corporate employee evaluation crap.

I returned to the kitchen and saw that Pedro had just put the bread loaves in the oven. I arched my brows at him. “Is there anything I can do to assist you?”

“Take the bagels out of the proofer and put them in the rack oven,” he said without hesitation. It didn’t matter that I was the owner’s niece, or technically in charge. Pedro knew that if

I offered to help him, I meant it, no matter how menial the task.

“You’ve got it.” I rushed over to the walk-in proofer and dragged out the carts of multi-colored bagels. Breadcetera had more varieties than you could shake a stick at. I always liked the look of the bagels, from the bright red cherry to the speckled everything variety. I loved the way they smelled as they rotated through the rack oven.

As I slammed the doors shut, I saw something that caused me to gasp in shock. My Aunt Petunia, struggling to get to the manager’s office on two canes.

“Petunia, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to handle the phones for you,” she said. “You’re so busy this morning.”

She tried to hide the fact that her knees were in agony. Aunt Petunia is not a small woman, and her repaired knees needed time to heal. I wasn’t having any of it.

“No way,” I said. “Come on, let’s get you back into your chair.”

I walked her—or maybe I should say hobbled her—over to the waiting wheelchair and sat her down in it. “Isn’t Price is Right coming on soon? You know you don’t want to miss Drew Carrey.”

“You won’t distract me with Drew Carrey’s intensely erotic sexual charisma,” Petunia said, her wrinkled face splitting in a grin. “If you can just route the calls upstairs to my apartment—”

“You’re supposed to be taking it easy. Go sit in front of the television, drink some tea, and leave the bakery to Pedro and Sascha and me, okay?”

“Well, my knees are kind of swollen...”

“Yeah! You just got them ripped out and replaced with bionic ones.”

Petunia laughed. “I guess Drew Carrey awaits me after all. But if you need anything—”

“I’ll give you a call.”

Once I’d dealt with that crisis, I went out to the sales counter and helped fill orders. I glanced across the stainless-steel shelf separating the kitchen from the sales counter as Yerkov slid two sandwiches out.

“Mr. Goldstein said you were a national treasure, Yerkov.”

Yerkov stared at me stonily, as he always did. He made a grunt I chose to interpret as ‘huh, isn’t that nice?’

Gradually, the breakfast rush died down, and we recovered the bakery before taking a breather. We didn’t get much of a lunch rush, more of a steady trickle and special orders for the rest of the day, until around dinner time when we had another rush. That was the cadence of Breadcetera. You rarely got a chance to sit down, but sometimes things slowed enough you could sort of relax. Sort of.

I stared at the corner lot adjacent to our store and sighed.

“What are you sighing about?” Pedro asked.

“I was just thinking, wouldn’t it be great if we could buy the corner lot and expand? We could have two registers, maybe

even more.”

“Ah, that’s a pipe dream,” Pedro said. “That’s primo real estate right there. Must be a hundred people vying to buy it.”

“Yeah,” Sascha added as she made her bank deposit drop. “The only way to get that lot would be to go down to city hall and schmooze the zoning board committee.”

“Schmooze, huh?” I grinned. “I work on Wall Street. I can schmooze with the best of them.”

Pedro and Sacha exchanged glances, then looked at me.

“Are you serious?” Pedro asked, a strange mix of incredulity and hope in his voice.

I stared at the corner lot and set my jaw hard.

“As a heart attack, Pedro. As a heart attack.”

Chapter Three

Amelia

When I went to bed that night, all I could think about was the corner lot. If we acquired it, I would be able to expand the store and the kitchen, hire new staff, and make everyone’s lives easier.

I wasn’t after the corner lot to be greedy, you understand. I genuinely wanted to help Breadcetera be the best place for its employees and guests it could be. I know that sounds cheesy, but that’s where I was at mentally.

I stayed awake for a long time, staring at the ceiling and imagining the ways I could increase our chances of being the

winning bid to purchase the lot from the city. I knew right away that money wasn't in our favor. Other people could probably raise a lot more capital.

Instead, I had to figure out a way to make us look like the most attractive option possible. When I awoke the next morning, I dove into the internet and gave myself a breakneck education in all things related to municipal development. Complicated? You'd better believe it was complicated. I mean, there were so many factors I'd never considered.

My head was swimming with facts and figures at the bakery all day. I began to seize on one aspect that I thought I could play to my advantage; Breadcetera qualified to be a historical landmark based on the fact it had been in place for forty years.

I considered this a great stroke of luck, something literally no one else would be able to bring to the negotiating table when it came time to decide who got the corner lot. However, I also knew that it wasn't going to be enough on its own.

I had to schmooze. I had to get the zoning board members to know my face and think fondly of me and Breadcetera when push came to shove. The only problem was, I didn't exactly run in the same circles.

When things slowed down at the bakery, I ducked into the office and doxed the zoning board members. I tried to identify people who would be the most sympathetic to my cause so I could target them directly.

That meant that one of the board members, Lucille Madden, was out right from the start. She was allergic to gluten, and

while I did have a small gluten-free section it wasn't what Breadcetera was known for.

Chad Maddox was a real estate lawyer by trade and said to be a 'chocoholic.' I circled his name on my printouts three times as a possible easy mark. His daughter was into equestrian sports, but I wasn't sure how to work that to my advantage.

Milton Carlyle was on his third bypass, so he was a no-go. Jonas Byrd played for the Yankees for years before becoming an investment banker, and I had a cookie named after him. He was also said to be fond of donuts. The final board member, Dennis Jackson, was a minister and ran a youth center downtown. I wasn't sure how to approach him yet.

I compiled my dox and started making connections. I discovered, to my delight, that four of the board members were participating in a charity mixed doubles tennis tournament at the Meachum Country Club that upcoming weekend.

Then I realized I had a dilemma. I didn't have a membership to the country club, and that was a prerequisite to gaining entry to the tournament. I mentioned it to Aunt Petunia that evening as I served her Tarragon Chicken over rice.

"I don't suppose you know anybody with a country club membership I can team up with, do you?"

"Oh yeah," Aunt Petunia said. "Daryl can hook you up—no, wait."

Her face scrunched up in thought. "He's dead, now that I think about it."

"Oh, I'm sorry—"

“Don’t sweat it, dear. I’ll get Tyson to help. He’s got a membership too...”

“What?” I prompted when she didn’t go on further.

“Actually, this is quite embarrassing, but now that I think about it, Tyson is dead too.”

I held my hand up, growing alarmed by the increasingly morbid nature of our conversation. “That’s okay, you know what? Forget that I even—”

“Oh, wait, I know! Jimmy will be your part...”

I sighed. “He’s dead too, isn’t he?”

She nodded, looking sheepish.

“Don’t sweat it, Petunia,” I said with a frown. “I’m sorry, it must be so hard for you that so many of your friends have passed on of old age—”

“Old age?” Petunia sputtered. She fixed me with a frank stare. “Look, darling, Daryl took a horse tranquilizer and went scuba diving, Tyson went fishing for Marlin and hooked a Great White shark instead, and Jimmy...”

Her voice trailed off, and I knew I should have let it stop there. Yet, I just had to know...

“How did Jimmy die?”

“He choked on vomit.”

“Just like Hendrix? The poor man—”

“No, guitar god Hendrix choked on his own vomit,” Aunt Petunia said, looking a little green around the gills. “My

Jimmy was Jimmy Spielman, and he choked on someone else's vomit."

"I'm..." I laughed anxiously. "Really sorry that I asked you that question."

"Yeah, me too." Aunt Petunia shrugged. "Anyway, sorry I can't help you get into the country club tournament. Maybe you could ask the staff?"

"I don't think any of them has ever mentioned golf or anything related to the country club, but I suppose I could try."

"There you go. Now hurry up, that handsome British chef is about to say the F word a bunch of times to the rookies he's training."

She rolled into the living room, and I brought her TV tray and set it up across the wheelchair's armrests. I settled in on the sofa and stared at the screen without really seeing it. There had to be a way to secure my membership in that tournament, but I wasn't seeing it. I was about to toss the idea aside totally when Aunt Petunia had a sudden inspiration.

"Oh, I know!" She paused her show and turned to me with a grin. "If Breadcetera were to cater the charity tournament, pro bono of course, that should be enough to get your foot in the door."

I gasped. "Aunt Petunia, you're a genius!"

"Ah, you're only saying that because it's true." She thrust out her glass. "Would you be a dear and get me another one of those exquisite Harvey Wallbangers you make so well?"

I grinned. "Sure thing, Petunia."

As I mixed her drink, I realized something that made me groan.

“What’s wrong?”

I handed Petunia her drink and sighed. “Oh, it’s nothing, it’s just... I can’t do the tennis tournament. The convention center down the street is hosting that robotics competition, and you know how those geeks love them some of our cookies. We’ll be way too busy.”

“Ask Boris to work the weekend.”

“Boris never works the weekend. Boris has his own restaurant to run on the weekend.”

“I bet you can sweet talk him into it. His mother’s birthday is coming up. Offer to make him a cake.”

I beamed. “That I can do, Petunia. Thanks so much.”

I gave her a big hug, and then went downstairs to the bakery level of her building. I dug into the Rolodex and found Yerkov’s number.

Yerkov doesn’t waste or mince words. This is how he answered the phone.

“What you want now, boss lady?”

I explained my situation to him, and then offered my bait; to bake a cake for his mother’s birthday and decorate it myself. Not even Aunt Petunia could say she was as good as me at decorating a cake.

“Okay, is deal, on one condition,” he said in his thickly accented, gravel guts voice. “The cake must be custom.”

“Of course, Yerkov, I’ll decorate it however you want.”

“Good. Must have naked Jason Momoa. Anatomically correct, of course. Mother will love it.”

I almost choked to death on my tea, but I agreed to his terms and got myself into that damn tournament.

Chapter Four

Jonathon

I’ll admit that I’m the kind of predator who enjoys the hunt more than the kill. In particular, I enjoy the hunt far more than I enjoy actually digesting the prey I have stalked.

With a company like Acme, it was a bit simpler to integrate into our existing portfolio because it was, by and large, self-sustaining. Unless I made massive cuts to the staff—and that’s always a bad idea, no matter how many raises the current employees have had—Acme Bread could continue on more or less as it had before I’d acquired it.

I spent hours in the CEO’s office—I nominated myself and the board voted unanimously to instate me. There were ten votes and one abstention. I was the abstention—digging through the Acme financial records to find out not just where they were, but where they intended to be going. If the previous leadership had good ideas, I saw no reason not to act on them.

I was assisted in this task by Darwin Mundy, ostensibly my personal assistant but a lot of the time he’s like a nanny to me. Case in point—

“I’ve brought you a sandwich, Jon,” he said with a definite south London accent. I looked over at the blade-thin, curly-haired sixtyish Mundy and cocked a brow.

“What kind?”

“Chicken salad?”

“Excellent choice. Thank you. You can set it down there and I’ll get to it in a minute.”

“Oh, Jonathon,” Darwin said, settling in beside me and fixing me with a firm stare. “You know that’s not how this works. I’m staying until you finish every bite.”

“I had a big lunch.”

“You skipped lunch.”

I felt my stomach. I was hungry, but I’d learned to ignore anything that got in the way of my goals, including physical discomfort. “Fair enough.”

I bit into the sandwich and gestured at the files on my computer. “Acme Bread has been phoning it in for the past two decades, Darwin. Their fiscal strategy is a cut and paste of the previous year with minimum changes. They’ve been getting by on market presence and brand recognition alone.”

“If anyone can straighten them out, I would imagine that it’s you.” Darwin opened up a bottle of something bubbly and set it in front of me.

“What in the world is this?” I sniffed the bottle, and found it had an oddly acrid aroma, with a hint of ginger.

“Kombucha,” Darwin declared. “It will help keep your gut in shape.”

“My gut is in fantastic shape.”

“I mean on the inside, Jonathon.” He rolled his eyes. “Drink it. You’ve been eating erratically for too long and this will help keep your gut in balance.”

“If you say so, Darwin.” I tried it and grimaced. “It tastes horrible.”

“Unfortunate, as I can’t leave until you’ve finished every last drop.”

I gave him a look. “Sometimes I wonder which one of us is in charge, Darwin.”

“Don’t be silly, Jonathon. You are, of course. But since you pay me to take care of you, and I’m in charge of your health, sometimes I outrank you.”

I tilted my head to the side. “That didn’t make any sense.”

“It will one day, when you’re truly wise. Eat up. Drink up.”

I obliged, enjoying the sandwich but cursing the kombucha. I flicked through the files on my screen one by one, scanning more than reading. When I take over a new company, the first thing I want to do is create some value for the investors, so they feel good about the new leadership. To that end, I usually try to expand a little. Nothing says business is booming better than building new locations.

Brick and mortar was still essential to a business like Acme. I perused the files, searching for any good locations which had already been scouted. I figured I would start there and then do my own search.

Most of the locales were less than primo. One of them was even in a shopping mall. A mall. I deleted that entire file. Then I came across something that made me stop cold. Right there, in New York City, was a primo location.

“Check this out, Darwin,” I said, finishing off the last of my sandwich though half the bottle of kombucha remained. “A corner lot, right in the heart of gentrified Brooklyn.”

“Indeed.”

“Yeah, you know what the first three rules of opening a new business are, right?”

“I believe that would be location, location, location, sir. For example, my location will be right here until you finish that kombucha.”

I took another swig and gasped at the foul taste. “Can’t they make this stuff taste any better?”

“You could always acquire the company and make them do so,” Darwin suggested helpfully.

“Don’t tempt me. It wouldn’t be wise to buy another business this soon, anyway. Not until I get this one to turn a profit. But I digress.” I peered at the lot, zooming in on the dimensions and the square footage. “My god... this location is like a license to print money.”

“I would imagine that you have sufficient capital to acquire it, yes?”

“Capital isn’t the issue, apparently.” My smile turned into a frown. “It looks like there are more than twenty different interested parties vying to be the one to purchase that lot from the city.”

“Well, a little competition just makes it more fun.”

“True enough, but I don’t see a lot of competition here... the only problem is, the city zoning board is known to be somewhat biased toward big-box retailers, and unfortunately, that’s us.”

“So you’re saying that there’s no hope?”

I grimaced. “I’ll never say that there’s no hope, Darwin, but... it’s going to be like ice skating uphill. In fact, one of the other bidders is a legacy business that’s been on that street for forty years.”

“I see.”

“Yeah, that gives them a leg up on us.” I sighed, running my fingers through my hair. “I’ve never heard of this Breadcetera place.”

“I believe they are family-owned, and not traded on the market.”

I nodded. “That would explain why I’ve never heard of them before. Are they any good?”

I did an internet search, and right away I realized we were in trouble. Five stars, five stars, five stars. Great food and friendly staff. Makes you feel like you’re a guest in their home. Best bagels in the city, fight me...

“How have I never heard of this place before?” I stared at a low-carb maple bacon roll and my stomach growled. “This stuff looks great.”

“It looks as if you’re facing some stiff competition this time, Jonathon.” He arched his brows as I sipped on my kombucha

and hated it. “Do you think you’re outclassed?”

“Never.” I did a search by date. “There has to be something we can use against them. Health code violation. Mobster hit in their store, something...”

I got nothing of the sort, but I did get a useful piece of information.

“Look at this, Darwin.” I tapped the screen. “Breadcetera is going to cater the Telly Savalas Memorial Mixed Doubles Charity Tournament. They’ll be providing a mix of Danishes, cookies, cupcakes, and breakfast sandwiches. Whoever is in charge of that place, they move fast!”

“What makes you say that, sir?”

“I happen to know for a fact that at least half the zoning board are active members of the Country Club where this tournament is happening. They’re trying to suck up to the board.”

“Why, those dirty, sneaky scoundrels, sir.”

“Are you kidding, Darwin? It’s brilliant. I wish I had thought of it first...”

Then I got a devious idea. “You can never have too much food at one of these things. Acme Bread is going to donate a full dinner bar to the tournament. I’m talking lobster, filet mignon, a champagne fountain, the whole works.”

I laughed wickedly, enough that Darwin gave me a look.

“What are they going to have? Egg sandwiches and cupcakes? No one will even remember Breadcetera.”

“If I may, Jonathon,” Darwin said, picking up the kombucha bottle and making sure it was empty. “You should enter this mixed doubles tournament yourself. Maybe you’ll get a chance to hobnob with the board members directly.”

“Darwin, you’re a genius. Remind me to give you a raise.”

“You said that yesterday.”

“Then I’ll give you two raises.” I stared at the screen and pointed my finger at the Breadcetera logo. “You don’t even know it yet, but the Tiger has you in his sights... and the Tiger always plays for keeps.”

“Growl, sir,” Darwin quipped.

Chapter Five

Amelia

I’d like to have told you that I went to the gym and started knocking tennis balls around and it all came back to me, and I was ready to play at an epic level for the tournament. I’d like to have told you that, but...

Instead, let’s just say I believed I could avoid embarrassing myself on the tennis court and that was about it.

As the day of the tournament drew near, I grew more and more anxious. My fears weren’t so much about embarrassing myself, as they were about screwing up our chances to get the corner lot. I wanted to impress the board members, not alienate them. Or worse, make them hate my guts and all things Breadcetera.

The night before the tournament, I remained at the Bakery until almost midnight, making sure that all of the food for the catering table would be complete and perfect in every detail. Of course, it seemed like everything wanted to go wrong. The cookies came out a little bit dark, or the cake didn't rise quite enough. I felt as if every tiny flaw and imperfection were magnified a hundredfold, and that surely anyone would look on it with nothing but contempt and scorn.

"Quit freaking yourself out," Pedro told me. "They look fine."

"Fine isn't good enough, Pedro! They have to be perfect. The future of this business is at stake."

"Chill out, Amy." He shrugged. "Sure, it would be great to get that corner lot, but if we don't so what? The bakery is doing gangbusters."

"I know, but... I just hate to see some big box chain stores move into that spot." My face twisted up into a frown. "Do you know who I found out is also making a bid for that lot?"

"Who?"

"Acme Bread."

"Acme?" He frowned. "That's like supermarket bread, though."

"Yes, but they also have a chain of bakeries, or to be more precise they took over Danish Hut several years back and turned the stores into their own chain."

"They can't be anything close to what we have to offer."

“No, it’s all prefabricated, basic with a capital B staples. Donuts, bear claws, Danishes, and two varieties of cookies. That’s not the point, though. We’re not worried about them becoming competition so much as we want to keep the massive corporations out of our neighborhood.”

I looked him square in the eye. “Don’t you see, Pedro? This is bigger than us, bigger than the bakery even. It’s about a fight for survival to keep our neighborhood out of corporate clutches. Now tell me again that I’m being too critical of this offering?”

I gestured at the table. Pedro considered it for a long moment and sighed.

“I guess I could bake another batch of chocolate chip—”

“Thank you!”

Yeah, that was why we were there so late. But when we were done, we had some great-looking food. I was tempted to try some, but I knew that I had to resist.

Well, okay, I did have an éclair, and Pedro helped himself to a mini pecan pie, but—shhh!—don’t tell anyone.

The next day I woke up with the sun shining in my face—annoyingly so—and my evil cat Tickled Pink standing on my chest demanding her victuals. I opened my eyes and stared into the pink slitted gaze of doom. Pink is technically my aunt’s cat, but after the surgery she was staying with me.

“Okay, okay, I’ll feed you,” I said. “Just don’t swallow my soul or anything.”

The cat yowled, and it was like the ghost of Jack the Ripper raking his bloody nails across a chalkboard used by Anton

Lavey when he wrote the Satanic Bible. I swear hearing it took a year off my life.

“I said okay!”

I sidled out from under the cat and fed her the expensive soft food with little bits of real shrimp Aunt Petunia insisted upon. While the demon master sated her hunger, I went and got in the shower, even though I knew I would need a second one after the tournament. It was likely to be warm that day.

I finished my shower, ate a quick breakfast, and put on my tennis gear. My racket felt awkward tucked under my arm, and I prayed again that I wouldn't embarrass myself on the court of the charity tournament.

I drove out of the city to the Country Club. The hedgerows marking the entrance were flanked by big concrete statues of roaring lions. Nice touch, that. I wondered if I could get a roaring lion for the bakery and decided it would take up too much room... unless I won the bid for the corner lot. Then, maybe...

I pulled in the visitor lot and spied the Breadcetera van parked near the main clubhouse's rear entrance. Pedro's cousin Chui was in the process of unloading the rolling racks of goodies with exquisite care. He knew as well as I did how crucial this whole scheme was. He wasn't quite as lackadaisical as Pedro when it came to expanding the business.

I searched for a parking space, and found the lot packed pretty full. It turned out that the Telly Savalas Memorial Charity Mixed Doubles tournament was a big deal. On my

third trip around the lot, I spied an empty space and gunned for it.

Only to have to stomp on my brakes so hard I was afraid the engine would shoot out the grill of my car. There was something laying in the empty parking space. At first I thought it was someone's brown leather golf bag, but then it moved. I saw long, drooping ears, sad-looking brown eyes, and a wriggling black nose.

There was a dog sitting in the parking space.

I rolled down the window and stuck my head out. "Hey! Get out of the way! Go on, shoo!"

The dog just sat there, looking at me. I honked the horn, hoping to scare it, but the dog didn't move. When the horn ceased its warning blare, he tilted back his wrinkled head and bark-howled.

Barooooo!

"Yes, that's very nice, now kindly get out of my way."

"Sorry about that!"

I turned toward the sound of the voice. Have you ever heard a guy talk before you saw him, and you just knew he was a fucking daydream just based on how sexy his voice sounded? It was one of those kinds of moments. My eyes fell upon him and I think I stopped breathing for a minute.

A tall, leanly muscled man approached my car. Muscles played on his long limbs as he strode across the parking lot. His eyes were bluer than the sky and deeper than the ocean. Sensual lips perched below a broad nose that gave him a masculine, almost primal type charm.

“Flash, come on!” He tucked his tennis racket under his arm and thrust two fingers in his mouth to let out a shrill whistle. The dog woofed, then stood up and joined his master.

“Sorry about that,” he said as I parked the car at last.

“No problem—I’m just glad that I didn’t run him over.” I got out of the car and looked up at his almost too pretty face. “Are you here for the tournament, too?”

“Me? No... I just happen to be a salesman of very ineffectual fly swatters.” He examined his tennis racket and I laughed. Damn, hot and funny too. I felt a twinge between my legs that I hadn’t experienced in far too long.

“Okay, stupid question.” I gestured at Flash. “I take it you were going to drop Flash off at the doggy sitter station?”

“Yes, I was, but then he ran away from me like a bad boy.” Despite his recrimination, the man bent over and stroked the basset hound’s flank vigorously. The dog groaned and leaned into the rub.

His gaze ran up and down my body when he thought I wasn’t looking. He lingered on my legs. Well, my skirt was a tennis skirt, and therefore pretty short. I hoped that he liked what he saw. He sure stared long and hard enough.

He stood up and offered his hand for a shake. “I’m Jonathon, by the way.”

“Amelia, but for God’s sake, don’t call me that. It’s Amy.”

“Amy, then,” he said with a smile. He looked at the racket in my hand. “I would venture to guess that you’re here for the tournament.”

“Me? No, I thought this was a very messy spaghetti strainer.”

He chuckled obligingly. “So, Amy, at the risk of seeming forward, do you have a partner for the doubles tournament?”

“No,” I said, feeling my heart jump in my chest.

“Well,” he smiled, and it was dazzling. I mean *dazzling*. “You do now.”

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About Laura Olsen

Laura loves billionaires. She decided to become a famous author to get a chance to meet one, but until then creates them on the page instead. And she makes sure that each and every one of them is hot and powerful, just the way she likes them.

If that's the way you like them too, visit Laura's website to learn more about her work and get access to exclusive bonus short stories featuring heroes and heroines from her novels:

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