

# Chapter 1

Fiona Carson left her office with the perfect amount of time to get to the boardroom for an important meeting. She was wearing a businesslike suit, her blond hair pulled back, almost no makeup. She was the CEO of one of the largest and most successful corporations in the country. She hated being late and almost never was. To anyone who didn't know her, and many who did, she appeared to be in total control, and one could easily imagine her handling any situation. And whatever personal problems or issues she had, it was inconceivable that she would let them interfere with her work. A woman like Fiona would never let that happen.

As she approached the boardroom, her BlackBerry rang. She was about to let it go to voice mail, and then decided to check who it was, just to be sure. She pulled it out of her pocket. It was Alyssa, her daughter, who was currently a sophomore at Stanford. She hesitated, and

then decided to answer it. She had time. The board meeting wouldn't start for a few minutes, and as a single parent, it always made her uneasy not to answer calls from her children. What if it was the one time that something was seriously wrong? Alyssa had always been an easy child, and handled her life responsibly as a young adult, but still . . . what if she'd had an accident . . . was sick . . . was in an emergency room somewhere . . . had a crisis at school . . . her dog got run over by a car (which had happened once and Alyssa had been heartbroken for months). Fiona could never just let the phone ring and ignore it if it was one of her kids. She had always felt that part of being a parent was being on call at all times. And she felt that way about being CEO too. If there was an emergency, she expected someone to call her, at any hour, wherever she was. Fiona was accessible, to the corporation and her kids. She answered on the second ring.

'Mom?' Alyssa used the voice she only used for important events. A fantastic grade, or a disastrous one, something seriously wrong at the doctor, like a positive test for mono. Fiona could tell that whatever this was, it was important, so she was glad she had taken the call. She hoped it was nothing serious and sounded concerned.

'Yes. What's up?' she answered in a subdued voice, so no one would hear her on a personal call as she walked down the hall. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes, of course.' Alyssa sounded annoyed. 'Why would

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you say that?’ It never dawned on her what it was like being a mother, and the kind of things you worried about, or imagined, or how many things could go wrong, really bad ones. It was Fiona’s job to be aware of all those things, and be ready to spring into action when necessary, like the Red Cross or the fire department. Being a mother was like working for the office of emergency services, with a lifetime commitment. ‘Where are you? Why are you talking like that?’ Alyssa could hardly hear her. She hated it when her mother whispered into the phone.

‘I’m on my way to a board meeting,’ Fiona answered, still speaking in a stage whisper. ‘What do you need?’

‘I don’t “need” anything. I just wanted to ask you something.’ Alyssa sounded mildly insulted at the way her mother phrased it. They weren’t off to a good start, and Fiona wondered why her daughter hadn’t just sent her a text, as she often did. She knew how busy her mother was all day. But Fiona had always made it clear to her children that they were a major priority for her, so they weren’t shy about reaching out to her, even during her business day. So Fiona assumed that Alyssa needed to tell her something important. They knew the rules. ‘Don’t call unless you really need to, while I’m at work.’ The exception to that had been when they were younger, and called to tell her they’d gotten hurt, or really missed her. She had never scolded them for those calls, neither Alyssa, nor her son Mark.

‘So ask me,’ Fiona said, trying not to sound impatient. ‘I’ve got to go to the meeting in two seconds. I’m almost there.’

‘I need a favor.’ It better be a good one, Fiona thought, given the timing, the edge in her voice, and the introduction.

‘What favor?’

‘Can I borrow your black Givenchy skirt with the slit up the side? I have a big date this Saturday night.’ She said it as though it were a crisis, and to her it was.

‘You called me for that? It couldn’t wait till tonight?’ Now she was annoyed. ‘I haven’t even worn it yet.’ She rarely got to wear anything first. Alyssa either borrowed it, or it vanished forever and became only a dim memory in her closet. It was happening more and more often. They were the same size, and Alyssa was starting to like more sophisticated clothes.

‘I’m not going to wear it to a track meet. I’ll give it back to you on Sunday.’ *Which year?* Alyssa’s notion on the timing of returns was a little vague.

Fiona was going to argue the point with her, but she didn’t have time. ‘All right, fine. We can talk about it tonight, when I get home.’

‘I needed to know, otherwise I have to go shopping. I have nothing to wear.’ That was too long a conversation to get into now.

‘Fine. Take it. Talk to you tonight.’

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‘No, Mom, wait . . . I have to talk to you about my econ paper. It’s due Monday, and the professor hated my topic, I wanted to . . .’

‘Alyssa, I can’t talk about it now. Later. I’m busy. That’s too big a subject to discuss in two seconds.’ She was starting to sound exasperated, and Alyssa immediately sounded hurt.

‘Okay. Fine, I get it. But you always complain that I don’t discuss my papers with you, and the professor said . . .’

‘Not in the middle of my workday, before a board meeting. I’m very glad you want to discuss it with me. I just can’t do it now.’ She was at the door to the boardroom and she needed to end the call.

‘Then when can you?’ Alyssa sounded mildly huffy, as though implying that her mother never had time, which wasn’t fair since Fiona did her best to be accessible to them, and Alyssa knew it.

‘Tonight. We’ll talk tonight. I’ll call you.’

‘I can’t. I’m going to a movie with my French class, and dinner at a French restaurant before that. It’s part of the class.’

‘Call me after,’ Fiona said, desperate to get off the phone.

‘I’ll pick up the skirt on Saturday. Thanks, Mom.’

‘Anytime,’ Fiona said with a wry smile. They always did it to her, especially Alyssa. It was almost as if she had

to prove that her mother was paying attention. Fiona always did. Alyssa didn't need to test it, but she did anyway sometimes. She just had. *Yes, I am paying attention*, Fiona thought, and hoped Alyssa wouldn't call again to ask for the black sweater that went with the skirt. 'I love you. Have fun tonight.'

'Yeah, me too. Have fun at the board meeting. Sorry I bothered you, Mom,' Alyssa said, and hung up. Fiona turned the phone on vibrate then and slipped it back in her jacket pocket. She had work to do now. No more lend-lease program calls for the latest brand-new, as-yet-unworn skirt. But this was real life in the life of a modern-day CEO and single mother.

She adjusted her face to a serious expression, and walked into the boardroom of NTA, National Technology Advancement, and smiled at the board members gathered around the long oval table, waiting for the others to arrive. There were ten members on the board, eight men and two women, most of them heads of other corporations, many of them smaller and some of equal size. Half of the group was already gathered, and they had been waiting for Fiona, the chairman of the board, and four other members before the meeting could begin. At forty-nine, Fiona had been the CEO of NTA for six years, and had done a remarkable job. She had come in on the heels of a predecessor who had stayed too long and had clung to old-fashioned, minimal-risk

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positions that had caused a dip in their stock in his final years. Fiona had been carefully selected by a search committee, and lured away from an important job.

She had taken over in her quiet, thoughtful way, had been incisive in her assessments, and bold and courageous in her plans. She took no undue chances, and everything she did was well thought out, her long- and short-term goals for the company had been brilliant and right on the mark. Within months, their stock had soared and continued to climb ever since, despite the tough economy. Both management and stockholders loved her, and she was respected by her peers and employees. Their profits continued to increase. She was merciless when she had to be, but everything she did was meticulously researched and carefully executed, and with their bottom line in mind. Fiona Carson was a star, and had been for her entire career. She was an intelligent woman, with a flawless mind for business. She was one of the most successful women in the country, at the helm of one of the largest corporations in American business, and responsible for a hundred thousand employees.

She chatted quietly with the board members as they filed in. It was still ten minutes before the board meeting was due to start. She usually arrived a few minutes early, so she could talk with them. The chairman, Harding Williams, always arrived just as the meeting was about to begin. He had had a distinguished career in business,

though not as illustrious as Fiona's. He had been head of a large corporation for most of his career, though not quite as big as NTA, and he had run it like a dictatorship, which had been the accepted style in his early days. Things were different now, as Fiona tried to point out to him when he made some rebellious move, based on his own opinions and whims. Fiona adhered strictly to the rules of corporate governance, the boundaries corporations and the people who ran them were supposed to respect. And Fiona expected the board to do the same. It caused disagreements between Harding and Fiona almost every time the board met. Fiona very charitably said that they were like two parents, who had the best interests of the child at heart, and that their widely divergent opposing points of view frequently benefited NTA, when they arrived at compromise positions. But getting there gave Fiona severe headaches, and brought out the worst in them both. She respected Harding Williams as a chairman, and his long experience, but it was obvious to everyone that she loathed him as a person, and he hated her even more. He made no secret of it, frequently making uncalled-for derogatory personal comments about her, or rolling his eyes at her suggestions, while she was unfailingly diplomatic, respectful, and discreet, no matter what it cost her to do so. He hurt Fiona's feelings with the cutting things he said, both to her face and behind her back, but she never



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let it show. She would never have given him the satisfaction of letting him see how much he upset her. She was a professional to her core. Her assistant always had two Advils and a glass of water waiting on Fiona's desk when she got back to her office after a board meeting, and today would be no different. Fiona had called the emergency meeting, to attempt to solve a problem with the board.

Harding thought the meeting ridiculous and had complained about coming in. He had been retired from his own job for the past five years, but was still a powerful chairman, and on several other boards. He was going to be obliged to retire as chairman of NTA's board by the end of the year, when he would turn seventy, unless they voted to overturn the rule about mandatory retirement age for a board member, but no one had done so so far. She was looking forward to his leaving at the end of the year, in seven months. And she had to deal with him constructively until then. It was an effort she always made, and had for the past six years, since she had come to NTA as CEO.

And she had known for the past six years, since she took the job, that Harding Williams said she was a woman of loose morals and a bitch. He had been at NTA, on the board, long before she got there, and they had crossed paths before, in her youth, at Harvard Business School, where he taught a class during her first year. He had formed his opinion of her then and never changed it since.

## Danielle Steel

Fiona would have been a beautiful woman with very little effort, which she chose not to make. She didn't spend time worrying about being attractive to the men she met through her work. Her only interest was in guiding the company and its hundred thousand employees to ever greater heights. She had long since adopted the style of women in the corporate world. She was tall and thin, with a good figure, she wore her long blond hair in a neat bun, and she had big green eyes. She wore no jewelry, no frills. Her nails were always impeccably manicured, with colorless polish. She was the epitome of a successful, powerful female executive. She was the iron hand in the velvet glove. A strong woman, she did not abuse her power but was willing to make all the tough decisions that came with the job, and she accepted the criticism and problems that came with it. No one could ever see her own concerns about her decisions, her fear that things might go wrong, her regrets when they had to close a plant that eliminated thousands of jobs. She lay awake thinking about it on many nights. But at work she always seemed calm, cool, fearless, intelligent, compassionate, and polite. Her gentler side, and there was one, never showed at work. She couldn't afford to express it here; it would have been dangerous to do so in her job. She had to be their fearless leader, and she was aware of it at all times.

Fiona waited until all the board members were seated,

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and Harding Williams called the meeting to order, and then he turned to her with a sarcastic look, which she ignored.

‘You wanted this meeting, Fiona. Tell us what you want, and I hope it was worth getting everyone to drop what they were doing and show up for a meeting that wasn’t planned. I don’t see why you couldn’t send us all a memo. I have better things to do than run in here every time you get a new idea, and I’m sure my fellow board members do too.’ So did she, but she refrained from pointing it out to him. And she’d had good reason to bring them together, and she knew that Harding knew it too. He was just giving her a bad time, as he always did. He never missed a chance to put her down. She always felt like a student with him, and one who was failing the course, which was certainly not the case. But nothing showed.

Harding had let slip more than once over the years that he didn’t think women should run major corporations, nor were capable of it, and he was convinced that Fiona was no exception. He hated the powerful positions women had today, and it always irked him. He had been married himself for forty-four years to a woman who had gone to Vassar, had a master’s in art history from Radcliffe, and never worked. They had no children, and Marjorie Williams lived entirely in his shadow, waiting to do as she was told. It suited Harding to perfection, and

he always bragged about the length of their marriage, particularly when he heard about other marriages that had failed. There was nothing modest or humble about Harding, and his arrogance made him disliked by many. Fiona was top of that list.

‘I called the meeting today,’ Fiona said quietly, sitting up straight in her chair. Despite her calm voice, she had a delivery style that people listened to, and she could electrify every person in the room, when she shared some of her more innovative ideas. ‘Because I want to discuss the recent leak in the press.’ They all knew about it, and every member of the board was concerned. ‘I think we all agree that it puts us in an awkward position. The closing of the Larksberry plant is going to impact thousands of our employees, who will be laid off. It’s an announcement that will need to be made with extreme caution. How we deliver that message, and how we handle it thereafter, if managed badly, could have a very serious negative effect on our stock, and could even cause panic in the market. And there’s no question, even though we voted on it in our last meeting, that announcing it to the public, our stockholders, or our employees is still premature. Now we need time to put damage control measures in place, and I’ve been working on that full-time since we last met. I think we have some very good plans to take at least some of the sting out of it. We *have* to close that plant, for the health of the company, but the last thing any of us

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wanted was for that to be leaked to the press before we had the details settled. And as you all know, it came out two weeks ago in the *Wall Street Journal* and then the *New York Times*. I've been doing nothing but clean-up ever since. And I think we're all in agreement that the most disturbing thing about this is not just the timing, but that clearly, it was leaked by someone on the board. The information that appeared in the press is only known by us, in this room. Some of it has never been in writing, and there is just no way for the press to know any of it, unless someone in this room talked.'

There was a heavy silence, as Fiona looked from one to the other with an intense and serious gaze. Her expression let no one off the hook. 'It's unthinkable that that should happen here. It's the first time in my six years at NTA, and I have never had a leak from the boardroom in my entire career. I know it happens, but this is a first for me, and probably for some of you too.' She looked at each of them again, and they all nodded. None of them looked guilty to her, and Harding looked seriously annoyed, as though she were wasting their time, which they all knew she wasn't. Clearly someone on the board was leaking information, and Fiona intended to find out who it was. She wanted to know as soon as possible, and to get the errant member off the board. It was far too serious an offense to take lightly or ignore.

'I think we all deserve to know who violated the

confidentiality of the board, and so far you all deny responsibility for it. That's not good enough,' she said severely with fire flashing in her green eyes. 'There's too much at stake here, the health of our company, the stability of our stock. We have a responsibility to our stockholders, and our employees. I want to know who talked to the press, and so should you.' Everyone nodded, and Harding looked bored.

'Get to the point, Fiona,' Harding Williams cut in rudely. 'What are you suggesting? Lie detector tests for the board? Fine, you can start with me. Let's get this over with, without a ridiculous amount of fuss. There was a leak, we seem to have survived it, and maybe it gives the employees we're laying off and the public a little warning. I'm not excusing what happened, but maybe it was not an entirely bad thing.'

'I don't agree with you. And I think it's important that we know who did it, and see to it that it doesn't happen again.'

'Fine. You can have your witch hunt, but I'm warning you that I won't agree to any illegal methods to determine that. We all know what happened at Hewlett-Packard a few years ago, over the same kind of issue. It nearly tore the company apart, made a spectacle of the board in the press, and its members had no idea illegal methods were being used to investigate them, and the chairman nearly wound up in prison when it was discovered. I'm warning

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you, Fiona. I don't intend to go to prison for you or your witch hunt. You can conduct some kind of investigation, but every single procedure had better be legal and aboveboard.'

'I can assure you it will be,' she said coolly. 'I share your concerns. I don't want a replay of the HP problems either. I contacted several investigative firms, and will submit their names to all of you today. I want a straightforward, entirely legal investigation of all our board members, and myself as well, to discover who is responsible for the leak, since no one is willing to admit to it.'

'Does it really matter?' he asked, looking bored again. 'The word is out, you said you're doing damage control. It's not going to change anything if you find out who talked. It might even have been a very clever reporter who figured it out some other way.'

'That's not possible, and you know it. And I want to be absolutely certain it won't happen again. What occurred is completely counter to all our rules of governance, how we run this company and this board,' Fiona said, and the chairman rolled his eyes as soon as she did.

'For God's sake, Fiona, it takes more than "governance" to run a board. We all know what the rules are. We waste half our time discussing procedures and inventing new ones to slow us down. I'm amazed you find time to run

the company at all. I never wasted all that time during my entire career. We made good decisions and followed through on them. We didn't fritter away our time making up new rules about how to do it.'

'You can't run a corporation like a dictatorship anymore,' she said firmly. 'Those days are over. And our stockholders wouldn't put up with it, as well they shouldn't. We all have to live by the rules, and stockholders are much better informed and far more demanding than they were twenty or thirty years ago,' she said, and he knew it was true. Fiona was a modern CEO, and lived by all those rules that Harding thought were a waste of time. He criticized Fiona often for it.

'I'd like a vote on an investigation to find out who the source of the leak was, using legal methods only to get that information.' Fiona turned to the board with her request, and Harding was the first to vote the motion in, just to get it over with, although he made it obvious that he thought it was foolish and a waste of NTA's money, but he made no opposition to her request. Everyone voted for the investigation of the leak.

'Satisfied?' he asked her as they left the boardroom together.

'Yes, thank you, Harding.'

'And what are you going to do when you find out who it was?' he asked with a mocking look. 'Spank them? We have better things to do with our time.'



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'I'll ask them to resign from the board,' she said in a firm voice and looked him in the eye, and what she saw there was the same contempt she had seen in his eyes for twenty-five years, since Harvard Business School. She knew that in her entire lifetime she would never win his respect and didn't care. Her career had been phenomenal, no matter what he thought of her.

The root of Harding's dislike for her was an old story. She thought of it again after she left him and hurried back to her office, for an afternoon of meetings, that she had to rush for now. The emergency board meeting had taken longer than planned, with their discussions of the investigation, and Harding's interruptions and caustic comments.

In Fiona's first year of Harvard Business School, she had felt inadequate and in over her head, and thought about dropping out many times. She felt less capable than almost all her classmates, most of whom were men, and seemed a great deal more sure of themselves. All she'd had was ambition, and a love of business, which didn't seem like enough to her, particularly that first year. It had been a hard time for her. Both of her parents had died in a car accident the year before, and she felt completely lost and devastated without them. Her father had encouraged her to do anything she wanted, and she had followed through on her plans to get an MBA even after he and her mother died. Her only support system had been her older sister,

who was doing her residency in psychiatry at Stanford, three thousand miles away. Fiona had been frightened and alone at school in Cambridge, and many of her male classmates had been aggressive and hostile to her. And her professors had been indifferent to her.

Harding had taken a sabbatical from his career that year, and had been talked into teaching at the business school by a classmate of his from Princeton, and Harding had given Fiona a nearly failing grade. Her only reassurance had come from Harding's old friend Jed Ivory, who had a reputation for doing all he could to help and mentor his students. And he had been incredibly kind to her, and had become her only friend.

Jed had been separated from his wife then, in a stormy marriage. She had originally been one of his students, and both had been cheating and having affairs for years. He had been quietly negotiating a divorce with her, while separated, when he began helping Fiona, and within a month, they were sleeping with each other, and Fiona fell madly in love with him. She wasn't aware of it, but it wasn't unfamiliar ground to him. But it caused talk around the business school nonetheless. And Fiona was remotely aware that Harding strongly disapproved. Later, he blamed her for the end of Jed's marriage, which she had very little if anything to do with. And her affair with Jed ended abruptly at the end of her first year when he was forced to admit to her that he had been involved with

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another graduate student, in another field, had gotten her pregnant, and had agreed to marry her in June. Fiona was devastated, and spent the summer crying over him.

In September, when she went back to school, she met David, the man she would eventually marry. And somewhat on the rebound, they got engaged at Christmas, and married when they graduated, and she moved to San Francisco with him, where he was from. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. But the affair with Jed Ivory had left her bruised.

It had been awkward running into Jed during her second year at Harvard. He tried to rekindle their relationship several times, although he was married and had an infant son by then, and Fiona managed to avoid him, and never took a class from him again. By then, she knew that his affairs with his students were business school legend, and he had taken advantage of her youth and vulnerability. She had never seen or heard from him again after she graduated, but she knew from others that he had married twice since, always to much younger women. In spite of that, Harding seemed to think he walked on water, and chose to disregard his reputation for having affairs with his students. Harding's view of Fiona as seductress had never wavered, although she had been the victim and not the culprit. In his old-boy mentality, always partial to men, he still believed that she had broken up Jed's marriage, and had treated her like a slut

ever since. He never hesitated to hint darkly at her previously 'racy' reputation while at Harvard, and Fiona offered no explanation. She didn't feel she owed anyone that, and had long since come to view her affair with Jed Ivory as an unfortunate accident that happened during her student days, in the ghastly year after her parents died, which he had taken full advantage of as well.

Fiona had nothing to apologize for, but Harding was still blaming her for the affair twenty-five years later, despite her astounding career, seventeen-year marriage and consummately respectable life. If anything, it seemed ridiculous to her, and she couldn't be bothered explaining it or defending it to him. She had been dismayed to find that Harding was the chairman of the board when she took the job as CEO of NTA in Palo Alto, and he hadn't been pleased either, but there was no denying her remarkable skills, impressive work history, and sheer talent, so he voted her in. He would have looked like a fool if he didn't. The entire board said they were lucky to get her, and he didn't want to admit to his personal grudge against her. And Fiona had felt she could overlook his unpleasant style with her. She had, except for the headaches she got after every board meeting. She tossed back the two Advils and took a sip of water as soon as she got back to her desk. She had a thousand things to attend to that afternoon, and gave the green light for the investigation of the board. The firm they hired to handle it

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hoped to have the information about the source of the leak in six or eight weeks.

By the time Fiona walked to her car in the parking lot at six o'clock, she had had a full day. She stopped at the white Mercedes station wagon she drove, unlocked it, took off her suit jacket and laid it on the backseat, and rolled up the sleeves of her white silk shirt. Without thinking, her actions were the same as her male colleagues before they got in their cars to drive home. She was thinking about everything she'd done that afternoon, and the board meeting, as she drove out of the parking lot and headed home. It was a beautiful May afternoon, the sun was still warm, and she could hardly wait to get home to Portola Valley, where she swam in the pool every day when she got home. She could have had a car and driver, and no one would have criticized her for it, but she preferred to drive herself. She had never been enamored with the superficial perks of the job. She used the corporate jet when she traveled around the country for meetings or to visit plants. But she had never wanted a chauffeur, and enjoyed the time to unwind on the way home. The time between office and home had been particularly useful to her while the kids were still at home. Now, for the past year, she came back to an empty house every night, which was painful, but she brought work with her, and more often than not, she was so exhausted by the time she finished her nightly reading that she fell asleep on her bed

with the lights on, fully dressed. She worked hard, but she had always been there for her children, despite her demanding career.

She had always believed that you could have a family and career if you were willing to put in the time, and she had done it to her children's satisfaction, even if not her husband's, who had resented her career from the time she took her first serious job when her son Mark was three. The three years she spent at home with him had been her gift to her son, and she had worked full-time, at important jobs, ever since. Both children had never seemed to suffer from it, and her relationship with them was strong even now. As witnessed by her call before the board meeting, Alyssa called her mother frequently, on any subject, for advice or just to chat. Fiona cherished the warm, open relationship she had with her, and her son Mark. Her dedication to family *and* her career had paid off. She had managed to go to school plays, her son's lacrosse and soccer games, had done Cub Scouts with him, had gone to Alyssa's ballet recitals, helped with homework, and made Halloween costumes for them at two in the morning.

Alyssa was now a sophomore at Stanford, and wanted to go to Harvard Business School after she graduated, like her parents. Mark was in graduate school at the Columbia School of Social Work in New York. Unlike his sister and mother, who both had a passion for business,

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Fiona referred to her son as the family saint. All he wanted was to right the wrongs of the world. And as soon as he finished at Columbia, he wanted to spend time working in an underdeveloped country. He had no interest in business whatsoever. His girlfriend was a medical student, who had spent the previous summer working for Doctors Without Borders in Libya and Kenya, and shared his dreams and altruistic points of view. Fiona loved him for it and was proud of his goals, and Alyssa's too.

Fiona considered her career as a mother to be as rewarding, important, and successful as her professional career. And the one area where she felt like a failure was in her marriage to David. Very early on, it had become obvious that it was a disaster, and she had stuck with it for seventeen years nonetheless. She had always wanted to make it work, but David wouldn't let that happen. He had inherited a modest family business, and was a small-scale entrepreneur. Fiona's interests had been in major corporations and the business world on a much broader scale. He had wanted her to help him run the family business with him part-time once she wanted to go to work, and she had refused, convinced that it would be fertile ground for them to get into bitter battles, with each other and his family, and she was wise enough not to try. And she didn't say it to him, but she didn't find his business interesting enough. She much preferred the

harder challenges of big corporations and their impact on the world, and the problems they faced, and their far more engaging pursuits. And already with her first job, she had become aware of David's acute resentment of her success. She came to be the epitome of everything he hated. Not unlike Harding Williams, David used her as an example of everything that was wrong with women in business, and often criticized her for not being at home with their kids, when in fact she was far more present with them than he had ever been. He spent every weekend and two days during the week playing golf with his friends, while she rushed home from meetings to be with her children.

Fiona had covered all the bases, and tried to be a good wife to David, and he criticized her nonetheless. And the final showdown had come when she was offered the job as CEO of NTA. She had been stunned when he demanded that she turn down the job or he would leave her. Alyssa had been thirteen and Mark sixteen then, and she realized that it had nothing to do with them, despite what David claimed. It was all about his ego, and a chance to deprive her of the realization of her ultimate dream. After lengthy debate and careful consideration, Fiona had taken the job and David moved out that week in a rage. She was sad about it at first, but in the six years since, she realized that it was the best thing that had happened to her. No one was criticizing her, battering her



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emotionally, putting her down, telling her what was wrong with her and what a bad wife and mother she was, or making her feel guilty for her success in the corporate world. She had never made a secret of her ambitions to him right from the beginning, but she had just gotten too big for him. Or maybe he was too small for her.

In the end, although she felt guilty about it, and didn't say it to her children, it had been a relief when he left her. And it was lonely at times, especially now that the children were gone, although Alyssa dropped in often from Stanford, and Mark came home for school vacations, but she loved how peaceful her life had been for the last six years. Sometimes she thought it would be nice to have a man in her life, but so far that hadn't happened, and she was happy with her work and her kids, happier than she'd ever been with David. She realized now how bitter he had been, and how angry, and how much he had resented her for most of their marriage. It was a comfort and refreshing not to be the target of his envy and rages anymore.

He had remarried two years after the divorce, to a very nice woman who suited him much better, but in spite of it, he was still furious with Fiona, and expressed it every chance he got, particularly to their children. David's anger at her appeared to be an eternal flame. And his wife Jenny had the same negative feelings about the corporate world that he did. Her first husband had committed

suicide when his career fell apart and he lost his job over an accounting scandal that could have been easily resolved. She married David within the year, made him a good home, had never worked, and hung on his every word. And although he was only four years older than Fiona, he had retired at fifty, a year after he remarried, and he and Jenny spent most of their time traveling the world, while Fiona continued working, loved what she was doing, and maintained her position in the stratosphere of the corporate world. As far as she could see, she and David were both happy now, which seemed like a vast improvement to her, and she was surprised and disappointed that he continued to refuse to forgive her for her failings, and be friends. He just didn't have it in him. And their children were disappointed about it too. It was almost impossible to have both their parents in one room, without their father making barbed comments about their mother, and saying something overtly nasty to her. Fiona refused to stoop to his level and get into his games, and usually chatted with Jenny instead about her latest creative project or their most recent trip. She thought Jenny was a good woman and perfect for him.

And Fiona's own life was simple the way it was. She saw her kids whenever she could, worked hard at NTA, enjoyed friends occasionally when she had time, traveled for business though usually only on short trips, and had long since given up on blind dates arranged by her

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friends. She didn't have the time or the inclination, and the people they chose for her were always laughable mismatches. She was also well aware that women with careers like hers were not in high demand on the dating market. They were much too scary to most men, and the assumption was always that if she was the CEO of a major corporation, she had to be a ballbuster or a bitch. She wasn't, but few men were willing to find out. She didn't have the energy for dating anyway. By the time she came home from work, she was exhausted, she brought too much work home with her, and it was hard to feel sexy and interested after running a major corporation all day, which had been one of David's many complaints. He had accused her of no longer being a woman. He told her she dressed like a man, thought like one, and worked like one, and if she wasn't reading quarterly reports, she was helping Mark with his science projects, which left too little time for sex or romance. His new wife Jenny had no children, which suited him just fine. He was the only focus of her world.

Fiona still felt guilty over some of the things he'd said. She knew he was right that she hadn't made enough time for romance between them, but bringing up two kids, while fighting her way through the minefields of corporate America, hadn't left time for much else. And with the kids grown up and in college, it was no better now. She had no partner or distractions, worked even

harder than before, and filled all her spare time with work. It was something she knew she did well, which was a lot more rewarding than being told what a failure she was as a wife. And she had no desire to repeat the experience again. She was sticking to what she was good at now, working and seeing her kids whenever she could. It worked for her.

She drove up the driveway of the large handsome home in Portola Valley, where they had lived for the past dozen years, and she smiled as she got out of the car. She missed seeing the kids when she got home at night, and having dinner with them, but it still felt good to come home to the house she loved at the end of the day.

She set her briefcase down in the front hall, and went to her dressing room to change. She had long since taken over all the closets. She couldn't even imagine living there with a man anymore, and it was hard to remember when David was there with her. She lived a solitary life now, but one that suited her. In some ways, she had almost forgotten what it was like to be a woman, with a man she loved in her bed. But she had stopped loving David years before he left, just as he had stopped loving her. They had stayed together for the last years of their marriage out of habit and duty, and supposedly for the kids. And then she realized how much happier they all were when he left. Their life together as a couple had been bleak and stressful for years. And now her life was a familiar place,

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where she was comfortable and in control of her world.

She slid open the door to the patio, and walked out to the pool in a black bikini that showed off her figure. She was long and lean and in good shape, and didn't look her age, and feeling the last of the spring sunshine on her back at the end of the day, she walked down the steps and took off with long, clean strokes down the length of the pool. It felt wonderful after her long day, and suddenly her battles with Harding Williams, her concerns about the employees of the Larksberry plant, and all the big and little aggravations of the day seemed to fade, as she sliced through the cool water. She didn't have everything she had once dreamed of when she married David and had high hopes for their future, but she had what she wanted and needed now: a career she loved, two kids she adored, and a peaceful house to come home to. To Fiona, it was a perfect life.

## Chapter 2

Marshall Weston drove home to Marin County a little too quickly from Palo Alto, as he always did, in the Aston Martin that was his favorite toy. He worked in Silicon Valley, and was the CEO of UPI, United Paper International, the second-largest corporation in the country, and he and his wife Liz loved living in Ross. It was beautiful, and they had built their home there ten years before, when their kids were younger. The schools were great, and he liked living a little farther from his office. It allowed him to clear his head on the drive home at night, and he liked Marin County better than the peninsula. It was worth the commute to him.

Marshall was fifty-one years old, and had worked for UPI for fifteen years, and come up through the ranks in stellar fashion. He had run the company as CEO for ten years now, and made a fortune with them, in UPI stock, and his other investments had done well. UPI had been

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good to him, and he loved everything about his job. If anyone had asked him, he would have said he had a perfect life. His career was all-important to him, and Liz was the ideal wife for his needs. They had been married for twenty-seven years, and she had turned fifty in March and was still beautiful. She took good care of herself, played a lot of tennis, and exercised every day. She took Pilates classes, and swam in their pool, and she loved their life as much as he did. They had three wonderful children, and Marshall had provided for them beyond her wildest dreams. She had never expected him to make the fortune he had at UPI. She thought he would do well when they married, he had been hard-working and ambitious, even in college, but his success had been exceptional for several years. All their dreams had come true.

Liz had a law degree, which she had never used, and a good head for business. But she had opted to stay home for their entire marriage, and their three kids kept her busy. Their older son Tom had been born on their first anniversary, and he was in law school at Boalt now, and doing well. He was a good boy and got on well with his mother, although he had always been competitive with his father, and more so now with age. He had rivaled his father for Liz's affections when he was little, and had always competed with his father in athletics and every other kind of game. The two men acted like stags in the

forest, crashing antlers, confronting each other at every opportunity, which was stressful for all concerned. And as he got older, Tom had been critical of his father and accused him of trying to control everyone. And he was quick to accuse him of dishonesty that Marshall denied and Liz didn't see. She thought Tom was unreasonably tough on him. And as a result, at twenty-six, Tom came home less often now. He was busy with law school, and whenever he came home, he argued with his father about business, politics, and everything his father stood for. Liz was always trying to calm them down, and explaining each to the other. She had been caught in the middle of their macho rivalry since Tom had been old enough to talk and challenge his father on every subject. She still thought it would calm down in time, but it hadn't yet. And she knew that Marshall was proud of his firstborn, but disappointed that Tom's criticism of him was so vocal.

She heard Marshall bragging about Tom to friends at times, his outstanding grades and achievements, and wished he would express it to their son more often. It was almost a point of pride to Marshall not to say it to Tom, only to others, as though Tom's academic success enhanced his own achievements, which was something Tom pointed out and complained about to his mother too. He accused his father of being narcissistic, and seeing everyone in his world as an accessory to himself, which Liz denied. But there was no question that the



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relationship between father and oldest son was not easy. And in some ways they were a lot alike. They were bull-headed and stubborn and unforgiving. What she didn't like about it was that the tension between them kept Tom from coming home more often. He showed up for dinner sometimes midweek when he knew his father was in L.A. He was tired of arguing with him. He had great respect and admiration for his mother, who he thought was better, smarter, kinder, and more patient than his father deserved. Liz did everything to make Marshall's life easier for him, in gratitude for all he did for her, and simply because she loved him deeply. Liz had been the perfect wife for twenty-seven years in every possible way. And her oldest son thought too much so and his father didn't deserve her.

Marshall's relationship with his second son was infinitely easier. John was the son he had always dreamed of, star athlete, star student, model son. At twenty, John was a junior at Stanford, was on the football team, was getting almost straight A's, and came home frequently to see his parents. The strife between his father and older brother was a source of tension between the two brothers as well. John thought his father was a hero, and admired everything he did, and raved about him to his friends. John thought Tom was too hard on their father. Where Tom saw him as a sinner, John viewed him as a saint. The two boys couldn't have been more different, and John was

the light of his father's life. Marshall took him to football, baseball, and basketball games, and on hunting trips, for male bonding. He offered the same opportunities to Tom, who rarely took him up on them once he was older. Marshall and John had some wonderful times together, which always warmed Liz's heart. She just wished that her older son would relax and be more open to spending time with his father too, and appreciate him more. She still hoped they would grow closer, and tried to encourage both of them in that direction. But it was clearly easier for Marshall to spend time with his younger son, who adored him unconditionally, and they had a good time together.

The real challenge for both Marshall and Liz at the moment was Lindsay, their sixteen-year-old daughter. She shared none of their ideas, and was constantly at war with both her parents, and she was difficult for Liz too, who had infinite patience with her. Lindsay's current battle was for a piercing and several tattoos she wanted. She had six piercings in each ear, had gotten a nose ring, which her father had forced her to remove, under threat of restriction for the rest of the year. She had recently become a vegan, and refused to eat with her parents, and said that what they ate disgusted her, and she felt sick to watch them eat it. She had a boyfriend who looked like he'd been shipwrecked and had worn his hair in dreads for the last year. And when she wasn't seeing him, there were others just like him or worse. Lindsay was nothing

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Marshall had expected of his daughter, and Liz constantly reassured him that she'd grow out of it, and he hoped that was true. It was a lot easier for him to go to baseball games with John, or even argue with Tom about politics, than to deal with Lindsay's constantly rebellious behavior and ideas. She was barely scraping through school, and had been on academic probation for most of the year. She did everything she could to annoy her parents, and argued with her mother every chance she got. Liz was used to it, and tried not to let it upset her, but Marshall admitted to her privately that it drove him crazy and wore him out. Reasoning with her seemed hopeless. She was the most strident dissident note in their otherwise peaceful home life, and it was almost a relief to Marshall when he arrived after work, if he found that Lindsay was out with her friends. The only thing about her that reassured him was that she was not into drugs, but she was incredibly difficult anyway. That would have been the last straw for him. She was hard enough to get along with as it was. The sound of her bedroom door slamming punctuated almost every conversation they had with her. He was used to it by now, but dreaded seeing her at all.

In Marshall's opinion, Liz was not only the ideal mate and corporate spouse, but an extraordinary mother, and had spent untold hours helping and bringing up their three kids. She never complained about what she had to do alone while he was working, the parent-teacher

conferences or school events he didn't have time for, the social engagements he couldn't attend because he was at their L.A. office two days a week, or the weekends she had to spend helping him entertain clients from foreign countries, or the parties she had to host to further his career. Liz had signed on wholeheartedly for the role of corporate wife, and he knew he probably told her more than he should have, about upcoming deals or internal secrets, but she gave him excellent advice and he trusted her opinions completely, and she frequently gave him good ideas that he hadn't thought of himself. And in the midst of what she did for him and their children, she did volunteer work at a homeless shelter, and served on several committees. She was tireless in her efforts for the community, and had served on the Ross school board, and participated in their children's activities as well. He couldn't have had a better wife to help him in his career. Both of them were busy, he with his all-consuming career, and she with their children, the things she did to help him, and the volunteer work that was meaningful to her.

Marshall felt as though they were partners in the life they had built together. It was comfortable, warm, and successful. Liz wasn't a passionate woman, but she was dedicated, honest, reliable, trustworthy, and intelligent, and everything she committed herself to, she did well. She served as the role model for every corporate wife he knew. And he was proud to have her at his side when

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he entertained clients or members of the board of UPI. They ran their marriage like a well-run ship, and she had always been content to let him be at the helm. She had no desire to compete with him or have a career of her own. She never regretted the fact that she hadn't practiced as a lawyer, she just used the knowledge to better understand what Marshall was dealing with every day, while she drove carpool, took the boys to soccer, and Lindsay to art classes and ballet.

Marshall drove into the driveway, parked the Aston Martin in the garage, and let himself into the house through the back door. It was a beautifully designed house with tall ceilings, lovely skylights, a handsome staircase, and antique hardwood floors they'd had brought over from Europe. And the kitchen where he knew he'd find Liz was state of the art, with long black granite counters and all the appliances that Liz had wanted built in, and a glass atrium where they ate their meals most of the time. They only used the dining room when they entertained.

When Marshall walked into the kitchen, Lindsay was arguing with her mother, as Liz got dinner ready for him, and he could smell something delicious being prepared. The subject of their current battle appeared to be a concert at the Russian River that Lindsay wanted to go to that weekend with friends. Liz had already said no several times, and was sticking to her guns.

‘Why not? Everyone else is going!’ Lindsay said with a look of outrage, as Marshall walked in and greeted both of them. Lindsay ignored her father, and Liz smiled and leaned toward him for a kiss, and then handed him a glass of white wine, and pushed some raw vegetables and dip in his direction, while Lindsay didn’t miss a beat.

‘I already told you,’ Liz said calmly. ‘That’s a heavy drug scene. A lot of unsavory people go there. I don’t want you to go.’ Liz appeared perfectly calm, as Marshall sipped his wine and took in the familiar scene.

‘We go for the music, Mom, not the drugs.’ In her case, that was true.

‘I’m happy to hear it. You still can’t go. Figure out something else to do this weekend. Besides, you have SATs next week, and you need to study for them this weekend. They really count this year, for your college applications in the fall.’

‘You know I’m taking a gap year when I graduate,’ Lindsay said in a dismissive tone, and Marshall looked surprised.

‘Since when?’

‘I’ve been saying that all year. You never listen,’ Lindsay said with a disgusted look, as Liz took a roast out of the oven, and Lindsay made a face.

‘I listen, but I haven’t agreed to a gap year. I think that’s a bad idea.’ With a kid like Lindsay, who hated school anyway, he was afraid she’d never go back for college. And

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academic achievement was important in their family. Both her brothers had done well in school, and still were, at Stanford and Boalt.

Lindsay looked at him with total disgust then, and flounced out of the room. The familiar sound of her door slamming was heard a moment later, as Liz carved the roast beef, which looked like a page in a gourmet magazine. Lindsay had already eaten and couldn't stand the sight of red meat.

'I don't know how you deal with her all day,' Marshall said with an irritated look.

'She'll outgrow it. It's all pretty typical stuff at her age.' Liz looked undisturbed by the exchange with Lindsay, and smiled at him. 'How was your day?'

'Interesting,' he said, happy to see her. She was like coming home to an old friend, his best friend for twenty-seven years. 'The market was up, which always helps.'

'I saw that.' She mentioned a business scandal in the news then, and a CEO they both knew who had been accused of insider trading by the SEC. Liz was up on all the business news as soon as it happened, and it was interesting to talk about with her.

As usual, she had set the table herself with fresh linens, and he could see from her still-damp hair that she had just taken a shower, and she had put on an immaculate white shirt and perfectly pressed jeans. She still had the fresh girl-next-door looks that she'd had when he married

her. She had straight blond shoulder-length hair, she very seldom wore makeup, except when they went out, and her graceful hands had short, trimmed nails. Her one indulgence was manicures and pedicures every week, and she wore bright red polish on her toes.

The meat was cooked exactly the way he liked it, with fresh steamed vegetables. She was careful to feed him a healthy diet and make sure he didn't put on weight, and it was like coming home to a restaurant every night, with all his favorite foods. He hardly even noticed it anymore, but he loved the way she cooked. She had learned that for him too, along with conversational French and Spanish so she could talk to his foreign clients. They were always impressed by how proficient she was, as was he. She even knew a few phrases of Japanese and Chinese. Whatever Liz undertook, she did with an eye to helping him.

They were halfway through dinner when Liz mentioned the film festival she wanted to go to the next day. She knew that cultural events weren't his favorite activity, but once in a while she could convince him to go with her. Marshall preferred business-related events. He was all about his work, and usually so was she, but she enjoyed other things too, with a broader scope.

'I have tickets for tomorrow, in the city. What do you think?' she asked with a hopeful look, and he was quick to shake his head.

'I'm going to L.A. tomorrow. I need an extra day down



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there this week. We've had some problems in the office, and I think they need the big guns to help resolve them, so I'm going down a day early. Why don't you take a friend?' he suggested, looking relieved. He spent every Wednesday and Thursday in their L.A. office, and had for the past ten years. When they were younger, it gave her time to do things with the kids, and they were used to it by now. He left on Wednesday mornings and came back on Friday nights, in time to do whatever they had planned for the weekend, although he was always tired after his two days in L.A., and liked staying home on Friday nights. 'By the way,' he added, 'I've got Japanese clients coming in this weekend. I'll play golf with them on Saturday and Sunday, and I thought we could take them to dinner on Saturday night.'

'Do you want to entertain them here?' She had a good caterer she used for important evenings, so she could pay full attention to their guests.

'The Japanese like fancy restaurants, and they're bringing their wives. I thought maybe Gary Danko, or the Ritz. Besides, that's less work for you.' He smiled at her as she cleared the table, and served him fresh fruit for dessert. 'Sorry about the film festival,' he said with a slightly guilty look and she laughed. She knew him well.

'No, you're not. You hate that kind of thing. I just figured I'd ask. I'll take a friend.' She had a number of friends she did volunteer work with, or knew through

their kids, whom she invited to events like that. She could seldom convince Marshall to go. It was the price she paid for being married to a successful man, and part of the normal landscape for her. She was used to Marshall being busy, at meetings, traveling around the country, or in L.A., or exhausted and just not in the mood to go. He made the effort if he knew it was something important to her. He knew this wasn't, but it would be fun for her. She was good about keeping herself entertained when he was away.

Marshall went upstairs and showered after dinner, and then read a stack of reports he had brought home, while Liz curled up in bed with a book. She had gone to say goodnight to Lindsay, who was talking to friends on the phone about the concert she had to miss, and she had given her mother a dark look but kissed her goodnight anyway. Evenings were always peaceful and quiet in their home, especially now with only Lindsay at home. It had been a lot livelier when all three kids were still there, and Liz missed the boys. She was grateful that they had both gone to school in the West, close to home. At least she had the chance to see them now and then. And she knew it would be much too quiet when Lindsay finally left. She was threatening to go to college in the East, after her gap year, which she wanted to spend traveling abroad with friends. So Liz only had one year left before she had to face an empty nest, and she knew it would be hard for

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her. She thought that maybe then she'd start spending a day or two with Marshall in L.A. He had an apartment he used there. Liz just never had time to go with him, and he was constantly busy working anyway. And she didn't want to leave Lindsay, at sixteen, alone; the temptation for her to get up to mischief with no supervision would be too great. As a result, Liz hadn't been to L.A. with Marshall in years. She saved herself for his more important trips, like Europe, the Far East, and New York. And with some advance planning, she loved going with him. It was one of the many perks of their life.

It was after eleven when Marshall finally put his work away and came to bed with Liz. She was ready to go to sleep by then too. It had been a busy day for both of them, and he had to get up early the next morning to go to L.A. on the company plane. It was a lot easier for him than flying commercial, and eliminated waiting, delays, and long security lines. He drove up to the plane, boarded, and they took off for L.A. It was a terrific way to travel, and Marshall was never shy about using the company jet. It was one of the many benefits of his job that he enjoyed. And Liz had been on the plane with him many times in the past ten years, and she loved it too. It spoiled you for any other kind of travel.

'I'm beat,' Marshall said as he slid into bed with her, which was their code for his letting her know that he didn't want to make love with her that night. He never

did the night before he went to L.A., he had to get up too early and knew he'd be tired the next day if they stayed up late. And they never made love the night he came home either. He was exhausted after long days there. Most of the time they made love on the weekend, usually on Saturday or Sunday, if he wasn't too worn out after eighteen holes of golf. And now and then they missed a weekend entirely. But sex three or four times a month seemed about right to Liz after twenty-seven years.

He was sound asleep in less than five minutes, and as she looked at him, in their bed, Liz smiled. He still seemed like a kid to her. He was in great shape, and looked hardly any different than he had when they met almost thirty years before. Since then, he had become her partner, her best friend, the father of her children, and the husband she had always dreamed of. The life they shared was to be envied. Marshall was everything she had ever wanted and hoped for, and more. Even if their relationship was no longer hot and steamy, and they didn't climb in and out of bed three times a day, no one's life stayed that sexual after twenty-seven years. She was realistic. She had a fabulous life and a husband she still loved, and who loved her. After twenty-seven years, as far as Liz was concerned, that was pretty damn good, and more than enough for her.

## Chapter 3

Fiona Carson was swamped on Tuesday morning. She had interviews scheduled with both the *Washington Post* and the *L.A. Times*, to do damage control about the leak that had appeared two weeks before in the *Wall Street Journal*. She was careful not to outright lie about the closing of the Larksberry plant so as not to lose her credibility, and she admitted that it could happen someday, but she said that for the moment, the matter was still under discussion, and at the appropriate time, the board's decision would be announced. She tried to steer the interviewers off the subject after that and stress the progress they were making in other areas, and the positive decisions the board had made on many issues. Given the circumstances, in the aftermath of the leak, it was all she could say. Because of the interviews, which were a minefield, her day had gotten off to a stressful start. But handling delicate situations was part of her job, and she did it well.

She was halfway through her first meeting after the interviews, when Marshall Weston boarded UPI's company jet for L.A., calmly and in style.

He called Liz when he got settled on the plane, right before they took off.

'I'll call you later,' he promised, as he always did. He had forgotten she would be going to the film festival that night.

'I won't be home till late,' she reminded him. 'I'll send you a text when I get home. You'll probably be asleep. I don't want to wake you up.'

'I'm having dinner with some of the guys in the office after our last meeting, but I doubt it will go late. I'll text you when I go to bed.' It had become a convenient way of communicating with each other when he was traveling, or even sometimes when he was in town. They had picked up the habit of texting from their kids, particularly Lindsay, who texted constantly, and had had a BlackBerry since she was fourteen. It was her main means of communication with the world, and Liz found it convenient now too.

The plane took off a few minutes later. There were twelve seats in the corporate jet, and Marshall was traveling alone. The flight attendant brought him coffee after takeoff, and had the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* neatly folded on the table next to his seat, although Marshall preferred reading them electronically.

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But he spent most of the time reading earnings reports, and as soon as the plane landed, a car was waiting to pick him up and take him to the office. He walked into their L.A. offices at a quarter to ten, and was in a meeting twenty minutes later and didn't stop for the rest of the day. He left at six o'clock, and had the driver drop him off at home. He had an apartment in a building on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills, and as soon as he got out, he let the driver go. Once he was in L.A., he preferred driving himself. The driver was useful to and from the airport, but Marshall kept a car in L.A., it was an old Jaguar he had bought several years before. It was perfect for L.A.

He texted Liz and told her to have a good time at the film festival, showered, and at seven-fifteen he took the elevator to the garage in the building, got in the Jaguar, and took off toward the ocean. When he got there, he took a right onto Pacific Coast Highway, and headed toward Malibu. The traffic was as bad as it usually was at that hour, but he was in a good mood as he turned on the radio. There was always a holiday feeling to his two-day stays in L.A., and it felt good to be down there, in the warm weather. The city had a more festive feeling than life up north.

It took him half an hour to get to the familiar address. It was a mildly run-down house with white shutters and a slightly crooked picket fence. It looked like a cozy

cottage, but Marshall knew it was bigger than it appeared. He drove into the driveway, and turned off his car just outside the garage. There were two pink bikes lying on the ground side by side, and he walked in through the back door, which he knew would be unlocked. It led him past a large, slightly disorderly kitchen, and he opened a door into a huge sunny room, set up as an artist's studio, where there was a beautiful young woman working on a large canvas with a look of intense concentration. Her mane of blond curls was half pinned to the top of her head. She was wearing a man's undershirt that was well worn and splattered with paint, and she had nothing under it. She had on cut-off jeans that were very short shorts, and she had paint on her long shapely legs too, and rubber flip-flops on her feet.

She looked surprised to see him, and then sat back on her stool with a slow smile. 'You're here?' She looked pleased.

'I told you I was coming on Tuesday this week,' he reminded her as he walked toward her with a look that drank her in.

'I forgot,' she said, but she didn't look unhappy about it. On the contrary, her whole face melted into a broad smile as he approached her, and she put down her paintbrush and wiped her hands on a towel. He was wearing jeans and an open blue shirt, and he didn't care if she got



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paint on him. It had happened before. She reached out her arms to him, and he put his arms around her, nestled his face in her mane of curly hair for a minute, and then kissed her longingly on the mouth. It was a searing kiss that went right through them both.

‘I miss you so much when I’m not here,’ he said hoarsely as he nuzzled her neck, and she kissed him again.

‘You know what the solution to that is,’ she said softly, but without malice. They both knew that solution, but it had been impossible for him for eight years. ‘I missed you too,’ she said, and then kissed him again. There was an overwhelming sensual quality to her that he had found irresistible since the day he met her, and she felt the same way about him.

‘Where are the girls?’ he asked in a whisper. He lived five days out of every week for these moments with her.

‘At the gym with the sitter. They’ll be back soon,’ she said, lost in his arms, as he wrapped himself around her like a snake, and she could feel how much he wanted her, as much as she wanted him.

‘How soon?’ he asked, and she giggled. She had a wonderful girlish quality to her. She was entirely female, and every inch of her excited him.

‘Maybe half an hour,’ she answered, and with that he picked her up in his arms, and carried her up to her bedroom. She was reasonably tall, but thin and as light as a

feather. And a moment later, he set her down on her bed, tore his clothes off, as she peeled off her ancient paint-splattered undershirt and dropped the cut-off jeans and the thong she was wearing underneath. Less than a minute later, they were both naked and wrapped in each other's arms, overwhelmed by the passion that had consumed them for eight years. It had been a white-hot union from the moment they met. She had been a temporary receptionist in his L.A. office, and by the time she left a month later, they were having an affair, and he hadn't been able to tear himself away from her ever since. He could never get enough of her, he was obsessed with her and always had been. And he came with a roaring sound that was always music to her ears. They were both more careful whenever the girls were home, but now they didn't have to be and could abandon themselves to each other.

He lay in bed with her afterward, and looked at her. He didn't know how it could get any better, but it always did. Just the few days he spent away from her every week made him fall in love with her all over again.

'I missed you so much this week,' he said, and meant it.

'Me too.' She never asked him how his week had been, how work was, or about his life in San Francisco. She didn't want to know. They lived in the present moment,

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with no past and no future. Ashley Briggs had become the woman of his dreams.

She was a talented artist, and he had bought the house in Malibu seven years before. She had lived there ever since. They heard the front door slam then, and voices below, and both Marshall and Ashley leaped out of bed and back into their clothes, and then followed each other downstairs with a guilty look. There were two identically beautiful little girls at the foot of the stairs, in gym clothes, with the same lush curls as their mother, and they looked at Marshall with delight and ran halfway up the stairs and threw themselves at him and almost knocked him down, but he was laughing, as he pulled them each toward him with one arm. He was an entirely different man here and had been for all of the years with her.

‘Daddy! You’re home!’ Kendall squealed in delight while Marshall tickled her, and Kezia just clung to him with a happy smile. Kendall was the older of the identical twins by four minutes, and she never let Kezia live it down. She claimed priority in everything by virtue of age, but Marshall loved them both. They were like two angels who had fallen into his life, and Ashley was the guardian angel who had brought them to him. He had never felt love in his life as he did for her and their girls. What he shared with Liz was entirely different. That was reason. This was love, as he had never experienced it before.

‘How was the gym?’ he asked them as though he had

seen them that morning. The girls were used to his schedule and the fact that he was only with them for two days a week. It had been that way all their lives, and they no longer questioned it. Their mother had told them that Daddy had to work in San Francisco for five days a week, and then he came home to be with them. And the rest of the time, Ashley was alone with the girls. It wasn't always perfect for either of the adults, but it seemed to work. The years had sped by.

The babies had been an accident, but a fortuitous one. Ashley had been twenty-three when they were born, twenty-two when Marshall met her and was bowled over by her. And now at thirty, this was the life she led, with a man who couldn't bring himself to leave his primary family nor his wife. After promising to marry her initially, when she got pregnant, he had decided his kids were too young for him to leave them. There had been other reasons since. And Ashley was hoping he would finally make a move when Lindsay left for college. It wasn't much longer, and then he would have no excuse. He had also been afraid of the potential for scandal, if people found out about her and how they had met, and the impact it could have on his career. Major corporations didn't always take kindly to their CEOs having flagrant affairs with young women, and fathering children out of wedlock. And the stock market might not like it either, which would be worse. It had been hard to explain that

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to Ashley, especially when she was carrying his babies. She had cried herself to sleep every night when he wouldn't get divorced. But now, after all this time, his children in San Francisco were finally older, and she knew he couldn't live without her. She was praying that sooner or later, he would leave Liz, and move to L.A.

He had bought her the house to reassure her right before the twins were born, and he paid all the bills for Ashley and the girls. He would have bought her a bigger house, but this was the one she had wanted, and she and the girls were happy there. It suited Ashley to perfection, and he loved staying there himself. It was the coziest place on earth, and even more so when he was in her arms in their big comfortable bed. And yet when he was in Ross, that felt right to him too. He loved Liz and the life they had shared for so many years. In truth, he loved both women and both lives. They were the perfect complement to each other, and he couldn't have said it to anyone, and never had, but he needed both of them, in different ways.

'Do you want to go out to dinner?' Marshall offered, and Ashley hesitated. There was always a slight party atmosphere when he was in Malibu with them, and she let him indulge the girls, since they only had their father two days a week.

'Yes! Yes! Yes!' the girls shouted happily in answer to the question, and they went to a Chinese restaurant

nearby that they all loved. And well after the girls' bedtime, they all came home, and Ashley put them to bed. They shared a room on the main floor, below her own. And Marshall went to tuck them in and kiss them goodnight.

'They love it when you're here,' Ashley said softly, when he came back to her room, where she was lying on the bed, sated after dinner, and their lovemaking earlier. Marshall had just texted Liz before coming back upstairs, to wish her goodnight, and so she didn't call him when she came out of the theater.

'So do I,' Marshall said about how much he loved being there, and Ashley knew he meant it. And then he lay on the bed next to her, looking up at the familiar ceiling. He knew all the cracks in it, and the shadows, and had lain here a thousand times, thinking about her and how much he loved her. He couldn't imagine his life without her now. But when he went back to Ross, he couldn't imagine a life without Liz either. It was the single greatest agony in his life, and he had put off the decision for eight years.

Ashley knew all about Liz, and Liz knew nothing about her. And Marshall did everything he could to keep it that way. For now. He didn't want to hurt Liz, or destroy the love and respect they had shared. But the ramshackle house in Malibu was where he really lived and where he came alive, with Ashley and their girls, who had

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been a gift to him since the moment they'd been born. He had flown down from San Francisco the moment Ashley went into labor, spent hours at the hospital with her, and was there when they were born, and cut both cords. He had spent two weeks in L.A. then and told Liz they had two weeks of intense meetings that he couldn't get out of. He had stayed with Ashley to help her get settled with the twins, and hired a baby nurse to help her when he wasn't there. And Ashley had cried but been forgiving when he left. She had been very emotional then, during and after the pregnancy, but she had never considered not having his babies once they were conceived. She wanted them. And no one at the office knew what had happened, only Ashley's close friends, who didn't think much of Marshall. He was a man with a double life, which seemed dishonest to all of them. Only Ashley understood and forgave him, no one else she knew did. Her friends knew better than he did how often she cried when he wasn't there, and she kept it from the girls, and portrayed him as a hero, so they wouldn't blame him for their mother's tears.

They made love again before they went to sleep that night. He lay spent in her arms afterward, and drifted off to sleep as she lay naked beside him, in all her glory, grateful for every moment she was with him. She had lived the agony of their situation for eight long years, while he lived out all his fantasies with her. She knew it

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wasn't fair to her or the girls, but she loved him, and all she could hope was that one day she would win a real life with him, no longer hidden. And for now, she was exquisitely happy and complete for two precious days a week.



## Chapter 4

Ashley always felt as though they were a normal family, leading a regular life, when Marshall was with them in Malibu. He had breakfast with her and the girls, and dropped them off at school afterward. They loved it when he did that, and chattered happily in the car with him. He put them both in the tiny backseat space of the Jaguar XKE E-type, and drove them the few blocks to their school, teasing them and telling them funny stories. His relationship with the twins was entirely different than it had been with his other children. The boys had been rougher and sturdier and related to him through sports. And Lindsay had always been difficult, even when she was small. She had been argumentative and often oppositional, and a tomboy because of her brothers, who had always been her heroes. Kezia and Kendall were cuddly, feminine, flirtatious, and totally girls, and as beautiful and bewitching as their mother. Marshall's love

for them was an extension of what he felt for her. And he loved how pretty they were and how enamored they were of him. People noticed them and Ashley wherever they went. They were a striking-looking group.

Liz also ran their family so efficiently that there had been little time for whimsy and idle play. Ashley was so whimsical and creative that everything she did with him and the girls seemed enchanting. He couldn't have run his life that way every day, but for two days a week, he felt as though he were in a fairyland with her, and she and their twin daughters were the fairies, and he was the king. It was impossible for him to resist.

He was always in a good mood when he got to work, and rarely stayed late at the office when he was in L.A. He was anxious to get home to her. They usually went out for dinner, or brought in Chinese or prepared food from the grocery store. Ashley was the most exciting woman he had ever known, but definitely not a homemaker or a cook. There was gentle artistic chaos everywhere. And Marshall felt like a boy again when he was with her. All his problems and worries seemed to disappear, and he just wanted to play with the girls and lie in bed with Ashley. It was magical being in her world. And she felt that way too when he was there. He was the heart and soul of all her dreams. In the past eight years, her entire life had come to revolve around him, to the exclusion of all else, except their twins.

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Hardest of all was when he left them after breakfast on Friday mornings. He dropped the girls off at school, and usually came back to the house to be with Ashley for a little while longer. More often than not, they made love again, sometimes in haste, before he would go to the office, and then he liked to fly back to San Francisco around lunchtime, so he could spend the last few hours of the day in his office there before the weekend. It was perfectly orchestrated and well organized, but it tore his heart out every time, as the plane took off in L.A. and he knew he wouldn't see her again for five days, four if he could find an excuse to go back to L.A. early, and he felt numb afterward all weekend, which was why he disappeared to the golf course for two days. He had withdrawals from Ashley each time he left her.

By Friday afternoon, every week, Ashley was deeply depressed. She couldn't even send him a text. She had agreed to his ground rules early on, and lived by them. She had to wait to hear from him, and could not contact him in San Francisco or even at the office in L.A. It made her feel breathless and panicked sometimes after he left, knowing he was out of reach and she had to wait to hear from him. What if something happened to one of them? She knew she could call him then, which somehow made it even worse. She couldn't just call him to hear his voice. He always called her before he left the office on Friday afternoon, and from the golf course on the weekend. But

the only time she had full access to him was when he was in Malibu with her. The rest of the time, he was like a phantom in her life, and the reality of it hit her every week with greater force as time went by. It was hard for her to believe now that she had lived that way for so long. And at thirty, with two children, she wanted more.

She was sitting staring into space in her studio, with a bereft expression, when her friend Bonnie wandered in on Friday afternoon. She had seen Ashley look like that a thousand times, and knew what caused it. Bonnie hated Marshall for what he had done to her friend, worse yet, with Ashley's full consent. Because of her love for him, and then the twins, she had tacitly agreed to be the hidden woman in his life, and she was no longer the same woman she had been eight years before. She lived for him, and the dream of the future life Bonnie felt certain he would never share with her. No matter what he said to Ashley, Bonnie no longer believed he would leave Liz.

'Hi,' Ashley said, looking despondent when Bonnie walked in. She was wearing the same shorts and T-shirt she had worn the day before, because they smelled of him and his cologne. Marshall did exactly the opposite, and changed his clothes before he left L.A., so nothing he wore home would smell of her. Marshall had thought of everything to protect his double life for the past eight years, and he had it down to a science. Ashley had no concept of how careful he was.

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'I know that look,' Bonnie said with a disapproving glance at Ashley's face and drooping shoulders when she walked in. Ashley had been sitting in the studio in front of a blank canvas, staring into space.

Bonnie was her oldest friend, they had known each other since childhood. Bonnie was a production assistant on feature films. She worked sporadically and was currently between film assignments. She was always ten or fifteen pounds overweight, and hadn't had a boyfriend for a year. It gave her lots of time to hang out with Ashley and the girls. And it broke her heart to see her pining for Marshall, still hoping he'd leave his wife, and giving up her life for him. Bonnie thought he was the worst thing that had ever happened to Ashley, in spite of the enchanting twins.

'What are we doing this weekend?' Bonnie asked, helping herself to a Diet Coke from the studio fridge. She was always on a diet, which rarely worked.

'I don't know,' Ashley said, looking vague. It took her two days sometimes to get over his leaving. She never got used to it. And sometimes she didn't get out of the pit till he returned. Bonnie hoped it wasn't going to be one of those weeks. 'Maybe it'll rain,' Ashley said with a look of gloom.

'Maybe it won't, and if it does, we can take the girls to a movie.' She sat watching Ashley for a few minutes, as she tried to gather her thoughts and still couldn't. She was

missing him too much. Seeing her that way was more than Bonnie could stand. 'How long are you going to let him do this to you?' Bonnie asked in a strangled voice, full of desperation and concern for her friend. 'He's been doing this for eight years. You know, he's never going to leave her, as long as he can have you both. And she doesn't know about you, so if someone is going to take a stand, it will have to be you. He'll never make a move until you do.' She wanted Ashley to stand up for herself, but she never did. She was too afraid to lose him.

'I can't,' Ashley said miserably. 'What if he chooses her?'

'He already has,' Bonnie reminded her, 'by not leaving her till now. He chose a double life. And it's killing you,' Bonnie said, looking angry. She was furious at both of them, at Marshall for what he was doing, and Ashley for letting him. She was participating in her own destruction. It was an old story, and drove her insane to watch.

'What if he gives me up?' Ashley looked panicked as she said it.

'Painful as that would be, you might finally find a decent guy, who's actually willing to share his whole life with you, not just two days a week,' Bonnie said with a sour look. She always told Ashley what she thought, as a friend.

'His daughter is going to college in a year. I think that's what he's been waiting for. He didn't want to upset her. She's a very difficult child,' she said, parroting his

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excuses. Bonnie had heard it all before, and so had Ashley.

‘She’s not a child, Ash. As I recall, she’s sixteen. And he always has some excuse. The boys, his wife, his career. Do you realize that he hasn’t made a single move in eight years? How long are you going to let him dick you around?’ Bonnie looked at her in despair. ‘You’re the most beautiful woman I know. You’re better-looking than most of the movie stars I work with, but you’re thirty years old. I’ve been watching you go through this since you were twenty-two. One of these days, you’re going to wake up and be forty, or fifty, and you’ll have wasted your whole life with a guy who sees you two days a week, is still with his wife, and keeps you in the closet. Ash, you deserve so much better than that.’

Ashley nodded, trying to believe what her friend was saying, about deserving more. But being with him was like playing the slot machines in Vegas. She kept thinking that if she put in a little more time, another month, another year, he’d come around in the end. And instead, even she was beginning to suspect that he was comfortable the way things were. It was easier for him to have them both. And what he really didn’t want was to cause a scandal that would jeopardize his career. That was the most important factor of all to him, more than hurting her or his wife.

‘I keep hoping some fabulous guy will come along who will sweep you off your feet. But you’re never going to

meet anyone, holed up here, waiting for Marshall to show up.' They both knew that Ashley was emotionally unavailable. She was totally in love with Marshall, even more than she had been eight years before. She had still had her own life then. Now she no longer did. She was soldered to him. She felt completely married to him, and he was married to Liz. Bonnie didn't want to say it, but her worst fear was that to Marshall, all Ashley was was a gorgeous piece of ass. Bonnie didn't trust him farther than she could throw him.

'Why don't we take the girls to a movie tonight?' She was willing to do almost anything to distract her friend and cheer her up.

'Yeah, maybe,' Ashley said halfheartedly, but she was too depressed to want to go anywhere and Bonnie could see it. They went through it every week, and usually by Sunday night she felt better and more like herself again. Monday and Tuesday were decent days, and on Wednesday he would arrive and sweep her off her feet again, they would live their fantasy for two days, and on Friday night, Ashley was at the bottom of the pit again. And Bonnie was afraid that one of these days, she wouldn't be able to climb out of it anymore. Marshall was killing her by inches.

They went for a walk on the beach that afternoon, before Ashley picked the girls up from school, and they talked of other things. Bonnie made her laugh, and told



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her funny stories from the last movie she had worked on, and for a minute or two Ashley looked like the girl she had been before she met Marshall, carefree and beautiful and happy. All Bonnie hoped for her was that she would find that girl in herself again and reclaim her, before it was too late.

When Marshall got back to Palo Alto on Friday afternoon, he went straight to his office. He had two important appointments set up, and his Japanese clients were coming in that night. His secretary had made dinner reservations at Gary Danko for both men and their wives and him and Liz on Saturday, and he had already promised them two days of golf at Lagunitas Country Club, and they were looking forward to it. He was completely focused on his visitors from Japan, and the deal he was trying to make with them. It was an important one for UPI, which was all he could think of as he got to the office. He sent a quick text to Ashley to tell her how much he missed her and to give his love to the girls, and another text to Liz to say he was back, and would see her in a few hours. And after that he went to work.

He didn't think of Ashley again until he was driving home that night. He tried to call her from the car, but she had texted him that she and the girls were going to the movies with Bonnie. Marshall didn't like Bonnie, and knew that she was one of his harshest critics. And he

didn't want her influencing Ashley against him. But he also knew that his relationship with Ashley was sound, and she was as in love with him as he was with her. They were linked to each other by the pleasures of the flesh, the passion they had shared for eight years, and their twins who were the fruit of it. And what bound them was stronger than anything Bonnie could say to her. But he didn't like her troublemaking anyway.

And as he crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, he began to think about Liz and the weekend they had planned with his Japanese clients. He knew she would handle it perfectly. She always did. And her finesse in handling his clients and being the wife of a CEO was something he knew that Ashley couldn't handle. She was far too flighty and vague. She was an artist, and a gorgeous, sensual woman. But Liz handled her role as a corporate wife like a profession, with genius and precision. Ashley kept his soul alive, and his body screaming for more. Liz impressed his clients and colleagues. He needed them both, one for his heart, and the other for his career. And he respected Liz in a way that he never had Ashley, and knew he probably never would. Ashley had different talents than Liz, but Liz's skills were essential to the smooth running of his professional life and career. It would have been nearly impossible to choose between them, so he never had, although Ashley had begged him a thousand times to divorce Liz. But so far he just

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couldn't. He had to think of more than his romantic life. He was, after all, a CEO. And of the second-biggest corporation in the country. He couldn't ignore that.

When he got home, Marshall was as tired as he always was on Friday nights, after his two days in L.A. Liz expected it, and had cooked a simple dinner. Lindsay was out with friends, and the house was quiet. She knew he was planning to get up early to meet his Japanese clients for a breakfast meeting, followed by a day of golf and a fancy dinner, and he wanted to get some rest that night.

'I think I'll go to bed,' Marshall said, with a kiss that grazed the top of her head after he thanked her for dinner.

'I figured you would. You look tired.' She smiled at him. 'Tough week in L.A.?' He nodded.

'We had a lot of meetings. But everything seemed fine when I left.' Liz nodded and watched him go upstairs while she cleaned up the kitchen after dinner. She had been reviewing her Japanese phrasebook that afternoon, so she could greet their guests properly when they met them for dinner. She knew she would have to keep the wives entertained, while the men talked business. It was second nature to her, and she was looking forward to it. She loved being part of his business life, and doing whatever she could to help him. In the end, it had provided her a more interesting and rewarding life than if she'd

become a lawyer. At least she thought so, and she knew how grateful Marshall always was for her help.

And as he lay down on the bed, before Liz came upstairs, Marshall sent a quick text to Ashley, just to tell her he loved her, and as soon as he had sent it, he erased it. She knew not to respond, while he was at the house in Ross. And by the time Liz came upstairs twenty minutes later, he was fast asleep. Ashley had totally worn him out the night before. Liz smiled as she got into bed beside him, happy he was home.

## Chapter 5

Fiona met her sister, Jillian, for tennis on Saturday morning. They tried to play as regularly as possible, but at least half the time, one of them was busy. Fiona loved seeing Jillian, and they were both strong tennis players and enjoyed the exercise and the time together. Jillian was six feet tall, and as dark as Fiona was fair. Fiona looked like their mother, and Jillian was the image of their father. Jillian was six years older, lived in Palo Alto, and still saw patients at Stanford, as she had since she did her residency there twenty-five years before. She had had a solid and satisfying career and was successful and respected in the psychiatric community. She had published two books for laymen on psychiatric issues, one on the perils of marriage and how to avoid most of them and maintain a relationship that worked for both parties, and the other on navigating the shoals of depression in the modern world. And she was currently

working on her third book, on the effects of power and success on both men and women, and how differently it affected them.

When they took a break, Jillian chatted with her sister.

‘You realize that you’re my model for the female side of the book, don’t you? Or one of them anyway. I’ve been using you as a guinea pig for years,’ Jillian said about her new book.

Jillian had never married and had never wanted children. She had several long-term relationships, and many short ones, and was rarely without an interesting man in her life. She loved men, but it had never even remotely appealed to her to turn any of her relationships into marriage. And usually, after a few years, she moved on, to someone even more interesting and better, after auditioning several new ones. The men in her life adored her, and she stayed friends with them long after they broke up. She had always said that her niece and nephew, Fiona’s children, were enough of a ‘kid fix’ for her, and she was close to both, and called them regularly to see how they were. She was a terrific aunt, but had always been convinced she’d be a terrible mother. ‘I’m too self-involved,’ she admitted readily. ‘I could never stop what I’m doing long enough to give a child enough attention. Or a man.’ She had a busy, extremely independent life. And no matter how intelligent they were, she treated the men in her life as sex objects more than equal partners.

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They were so startled by it, they loved it. She was unashamedly sexual, even at fifty-five.

‘Power acts as an aphrodisiac for powerful, successful men,’ Jillian informed her sister, and then went back to the game, as she sent a crushing serve in her direction, which Fiona missed, intrigued by what she said. ‘And an anesthetic for women,’ she concluded, as Fiona listened with interest. ‘Like you,’ Jillian continued. ‘How long has it been since you got laid?’

‘You expect me to answer that?’ Fiona looked shocked.

‘If you can’t answer that question,’ Jillian said smugly, ‘my guess is you can’t even remember the last time.’

‘Of course I can. It was two years ago,’ Fiona said, looking momentarily miffed as they continued to play.

‘That’s ridiculous, for a woman your age. And you don’t look anywhere near your age, by the way. If you weren’t successful, you could have any guy you want. The problem is that you’re a successful CEO, which scares the shit out of any guy. A man in your same position would have women ten deep lined up at his gate, and be screwing everything that moves. Men in power feel sexy and are driven by sex. Women in the same jobs go underground and forget they’re women. Success is very isolating,’ she said, as the game came to an end, and they met at the net. Jillian had beaten Fiona. She almost always did, except if she was exceptionally tired or sick.

'I'm not sure I agree with the anesthetic part, but it is isolating,' Fiona said, looking thoughtful as they both cracked open bottles of water when they left the court, and took a long drink. They always played hard. It was relaxing for them both.

'I don't think women in your position feel sexy, because men don't pay attention to them. They're too threatened by successful women so they ignore them, and treat them like men, which is devastating for any woman's self-image, to be overlooked as a woman.'

'Maybe,' Fiona said pensively. 'I never think about it.'

'That's my point. I'll bet you never even think about guys, most of the time. You're too busy working. The male CEOs I know are having affairs, usually with unsuitable women. When was the last time you heard about a female CEO having an affair with a guy she picked up at a massage parlor?' Fiona laughed at the idea, and Jillian looked serious about her theories. 'Look at you. When was the last time you went on a date, or a guy asked you out for dinner?' Fiona thought about it, and honestly couldn't remember.

'I don't know, it's been a while . . . a long while . . . but in my case, loss of memory is a blessing. I've had some of the worst blind dates in history.'

'So has every female CEO I've interviewed. The good guys are too afraid of them to ask them out, and those women wind up with the dregs who go after them for all



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the wrong reasons, or some terrible blind dates set up by friends.'

'That sounds about right. Why do you suppose my male counterparts have more fun?'

'Probably because they go after it. And a successful man is a hero, particularly one with power. A woman in a powerful position is automatically presumed to be a bitch.' It was true, but the theory sounded depressing to Fiona, who had encountered the results of that stereotype too. Most of the men she had met had been afraid of her, and didn't want to get involved. And now she didn't either. She'd given up. 'Everybody wants to date a successful guy, they're in high demand. No one wants to date a successful woman, or damn few men anyway. They're too scared. Powerful, successful women get a bad rap. Not every female CEO is a bitch,' Jillian said, thinking about it, and Fiona laughed nervously.

'That's reassuring. I was beginning to worry. Am I one of the good ones or the bad ones?' She looked concerned for a minute, as they sat down on a bench with their water.

'What do you think?' Jillian asked with a wry smile, sounding like a shrink.

'I don't know. Maybe a little of both.'

'Welcome to the human race. I'm not so charming every day either, and I'm not a CEO,' Jillian said as they put their rackets in their cases.

‘I try to be strong but fair at the office, otherwise they’d walk all over me, especially the chairman of the board.’ She thought of Harding Williams as she said it. ‘But I tried to leave the gladiator stuff at the office and be a woman at home when I was married. According to David, I failed abysmally.’

‘Look what he married. Would you want to be her? She’s a nice woman, but her greatest accomplishment is making three-dimensional snowflakes and Easter bunnies from Martha Stewart’s book. Come on, Fiona, you don’t want to be that. You never did.’ She would have been disappointed in her sister if she had. Jillian had enormous respect for her. Fiona was capable of so much more than that, which David had never appreciated. Fiona had always wanted more for herself too, much to Jillian’s relief. The two sisters were very different in their lifestyle choices, but they were similar in some ways. Both were high achievers and perfectionists, and harder on themselves than on anyone else, and successful in their fields. And Fiona was powerful as well. Jillian thought it was their way of living up to their parents’ expectations for them, even after they were dead. And Fiona didn’t disagree. They had both been terrific students in school. Fiona was a gentler person. Jillian was tougher and more direct. And Fiona liked the commitment of marriage. Jillian never had.

Fiona was still thinking about what Jillian had said

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about David's wife. 'No, I don't want to be like Jenny. But I'm not so sure I want to be me either. You'll notice there's no one in my bed at night, or knocking on my door. So something isn't working right. Snowflakes and Easter bunnies are a hell of a lot less scary than a woman who runs a major corporation.' Fiona didn't look distressed as she said it, and knew it was the truth, and Jillian didn't disagree.

'That's my point. If you were a guy, everyone would want you. As a woman, it's *much* harder to find a good man. Particularly one who likes you for who you are, and isn't angry about it.'

'So what am I supposed to do? Get a sex change to get a date, if I ever want one again?' Fiona was laughing by then. She wasn't desperate by any means, or even interested, but once in a while she thought it would be nice to have someone to talk to at night, after work, or wake up next to on the weekends. It had been a long time. And at other times, she was convinced that she was happier now alone.

'No, you've got to find a guy with guts, who's not scared of you, or your job, who's not jealous of you, and has the brains to look beyond the title on the door.' Jillian was serious about it. She thought Fiona should have a partner, a good one, which was easier said than done.

'I don't think that man's been born,' Fiona responded. 'Maybe I'm too old,' she said quietly, and Jillian looked enraged.

‘At forty-nine? That’s ridiculous. You could live another fifty years. Seventy-five-year-olds date and fall in love. One of my patients got married last year at eighty-nine, and he’s still going strong.’

‘They’re retired and not CEOs anymore. I don’t have a hell of a lot of free time. And I have a feeling that as long as I’m working, in this job anyway, no guy is going to come near me. I’m not sure I care, in fact I don’t, but I think it may just be the way things are. And I’m not giving up my job for a date. My dating life hasn’t exactly been stellar since the divorce, which happens to be when I started this job, six years ago.’

‘You haven’t been trying,’ Jillian said with a disapproving look again.

‘I don’t have time,’ Fiona said honestly. ‘I work my ass off all day. I try to keep up with my kids, and see them when I can. And by the time I read the papers I bring home every night, I’m too exhausted to get up and take my clothes off. How am I supposed to date? And if I have a date, some kind of crisis comes up, and I get fourteen phone calls at dinner. No guy is going to put up with that.’ And none had in six years. And David had hated it before that, and her as a result.

The men who had gone out with Jillian had been much more tolerant of her and less threatened by her, although she was more outspoken than Fiona.

‘The right one will deal with it,’ Jillian said

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confidently. 'Maybe a guy in the same boat you are.' She had thought about it for Fiona before, because she hated how alone she was, particularly with the kids gone now.

'Two CEOs?' Fiona said with a look of horror. 'What a nightmare. Besides, my counterparts are dating twenty-two-year-olds. I'm out of the running. And they're mostly go-go dancers and porn stars. I don't qualify. Successful men don't go out with serious, successful women. They know better, or something.'

'You just haven't met the right guys,' Jillian said firmly.

'Maybe there are no right guys. The good ones are all married,' Fiona said simply.

'And cheating on their wives,' Jillian said knowingly.

'I don't want one of those,' Fiona said matter-of-factly.

'You need to get out more and meet more people,' Jillian said honestly. 'Just to have some fun.'

'Yeah. Maybe,' Fiona said, looking unconvinced. 'Maybe when I retire.' Jillian gave her a dark look, and then she asked about the leak she'd read about in the press. Fiona explained the situation to her and the implications, and told her about the investigation to find the source. She mentioned what a hard time Harding Williams had been giving her, as usual, which infuriated Jillian.

'What the hell is he so pissed about?'

'You forget, he was Jed Ivory's friend at Harvard. He blamed me for getting involved with him, and the

divorce, and has treated me like pond scum ever since.’ Fiona smiled as she said it, although he upset her at times.

‘You were a kid, for chrissake. Jed was already separated when you met him, and has he forgotten that Jed knocked up someone else, while you were believing his bullshit to you about it being true love? Please!’

‘Harding doesn’t believe that and never will. He thought Jed was a saint because they went to Princeton together. Old boys’ club and all that crap. Besides, I think Harding hates women, except for the saintly wife he talks about all the time.’

‘She probably has a mustache and a beard,’ Jillian said, and Fiona laughed out loud.

‘I’ll admit, she’s not too pretty. But he seems to think she is. So, good for him. I just wish he’d get off my back and stop punishing me for causing a minor scandal twenty-five years ago. It’s gotten a little old. I’d practically forgotten Jed until I ran into Harding again. It’s such ancient history, it’s hard to believe he still cares.’ But he did, and still blamed her, unfairly.

They chatted a few more minutes, about Mark and Alyssa, and what they were up to, and Jillian put an arm around her sister as they walked back to their cars. Fiona always loved their time together, and valued Jillian’s wise advice.

‘I really think you’re on to something with your new book. I never really think about how different men and

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women are, in the same position, but I like your aphrodisiac theory about men. I think you're right.' She liked less her assessment that power and success anesthetized women and dulled their sexuality, even if for lack of opportunity, but she suspected she was accurate about that too. Jillian certainly seemed to understand the differences of how power affected men and women.

'It's not good news for you, but I think I'm on to something too. I've been noticing it among my patients for years. I can't believe the messes my male patients get themselves into, if they're in the power game. They pull stunts no sane man should ever try, but a lot of them do, and then it blows up in their faces and everyone acts surprised. I no longer am. I wish there were a little more of that in your life,' she said, giving her younger sister a hug. She was a good woman and Jillian thought she deserved a good man. It had always been easier for Jillian to meet men, and she was more open to it than Fiona, who was more willing to give up on romance in her life, and be satisfied with just kids and work. 'You need to make more effort to meet a guy,' she said gently, and Fiona looked surprised.

'Why? I'm happy the way I am. Besides, I don't have time for a relationship.'

'Yes, you do. You just don't want to make the effort, or risk getting hurt again.' Jillian always told it like it was.

'Probably,' Fiona admitted. The last years of her

marriage had been so bitter that she had been gun-shy about relationships ever since, and had put more effort into avoiding one than finding one now. And the kind of men who approached her or she got fixed up with were a good excuse.

‘There are some good men out there,’ Jillian assured her. ‘You just need better luck next time. David was never right for you. It just got more apparent over time. He was always jealous of you and your career. He wanted to be you, he just didn’t want to put the time in to do it, and he wasn’t smart enough to pull it off so he beat you up for it instead. It’s a pretty typical tactic when a woman is more successful than her husband, but it’s a cheap shot.’ He had accused and blamed Fiona for years, as they both knew.

‘I think it cured me from marriage forever,’ Fiona said simply.

‘Hopefully not from relationships. I still keep hoping you’ll meet the right guy,’ Jillian said honestly and Fiona shrugged.

‘Why? You don’t have one at the moment,’ Fiona said.

Although usually she did. She had taken a breather for the past few months, after her last lover had died suddenly of a heart attack at fifty-nine, and she had been sad about it. They had gotten along well for two years, which was about how long Jillian’s relationships lasted. She got bored with them after that and moved on.



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‘We’re different. You’re better suited to long-term relationships than I am. I would have killed David after a year for his antiquated ideas and opinions.’ And she knew that Fiona had endured untold amounts of emotional abuse from him, and still did, for her children’s sake. He always had something nasty to say about her, which Jillian thought was pathetic and Fiona agreed. But he was the father of her children so she had to see him from time to time, mostly at events that were important to them, like graduations. He was poisonous every time. It no longer hurt her, but it was petty and annoying, and upset the kids, who couldn’t get him to stop either, and they had tried. And even though he was happy with Jenny now supposedly, he was still miserable to Fiona, and resentful of the past. ‘You got great kids out of it, that’s something,’ Jillian said as Fiona unlocked her car.

‘Next Saturday?’ she asked Jillian hopefully. They always had a good time. ‘You can tell me more about your book about men and women and power. It sounds good to me.’

‘I don’t need to tell you. You’re living it. I should interview you officially one of these days.’

‘Anytime,’ Fiona said, and hugged her, and then slid into her car.

The two women went their separate ways, and Fiona was in a good mood all the way home, and even happier when she found Alyssa at the house when she got back.

She was picking up clean clothes and doing a load of laundry while she waited for her mother. And she'd already helped herself to the skirt she wanted for that night. She had texted her mother and knew she was playing tennis with her aunt.

'How's Aunt Jill?' Alyssa asked after she kissed her mother. Fiona was delighted to see her at the house.

'Fine. She's working on a new book about men and women and power. She thinks it turns men into sex maniacs and women into nuns,' she summed up, and they both laughed. And it sounded intriguing to Alyssa too, whose dream was to have a career like her mother's, despite the pitfalls and the problems she knew it caused. She thought her parents' marriage had failed because of it, and Fiona wouldn't have disagreed. And neither of them was surprised that Alyssa's brother had opted out of the corporate world completely. It looked like too high a risk to him, and an unhappy life. He had seen the price his mother had paid for her success, and thought his sister was crazy to want that too.

'Can you stay for lunch?' Fiona invited her, and Alyssa nodded. She looked a great deal like her mother, and she was a very pretty girl. Fiona made them a salad, and they sat down to eat at the table by the pool. It was a beautiful day, and Alyssa told her mother that she was dating someone new.

'What's he like?' Fiona asked with interest. She was

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delighted that Alyssa shared all her secrets with her. She loved being part of her life, and was always happy to make time for her.

‘He’s nice, he’s a junior, he’s on the football team. His name is John Weston. And his dad runs UPI.’

‘Marshall Weston’s son?’ Fiona looked surprised. She had met Marshall Weston several times at Senate subcommittee hearings in Washington, although she didn’t know him well. ‘His father is the poster boy of what CEOs are supposed to look like, the perfect all-American guy. I think he played football in college too, or looks like he should have.’

‘I met his dad last weekend,’ Alyssa said casually. ‘He says he’s a big fan of yours.’

‘He’s just being polite.’ Fiona brushed off the compliment and searched her daughter’s eyes. ‘Is this serious?’

Alyssa shrugged noncommittally. She hadn’t had a serious boyfriend since high school, but something in the way she looked told Fiona that this could be.

‘Maybe. It’s too soon to know, but I like him a lot. We’re going slow. His mom seems really nice, and I liked his dad. He and Johnny are really close. He has an older brother at Boalt, and a younger sister who drives them all nuts. She’s cute, just kind of a pain.’ Fiona laughed at the description. They sounded like a normal family to her. ‘Maybe I’ll bring him by next weekend.’

‘I’d like that a lot,’ Fiona said warmly, and they

continued to chat for a while. Alyssa was trying to decide on summer plans with friends, and she said Mark was talking about going to Africa with his girlfriend in August, but he hadn't made up his mind yet. And Fiona had invited both of them to Malibu in July. She had rented a house for three weeks, and they were all looking forward to it. They did it every year. Alyssa said Johnny might come for a weekend, which sounded good to Fiona too. She wanted to get to know him.

Alyssa left when her laundry was ready and promised to drop by sometime that week. Fiona loved that she still came by the house often to see her mother. Her life would have been empty without her children. And as she stretched out that afternoon by the pool with some of the work she'd brought home to read, she thought of her sister and what she'd said to her that morning, about making an effort to find the right man to share her life with. It was hard to imagine finding such a man, and being willing to let him into her life if she did. Her life was so much simpler like this, and she had all the closets. No one was torturing her or blaming her for anything. No one was angry about her career or telling her what she was doing wrong. Fiona couldn't imagine dealing with any of it again. For the past six years since her divorce, her life had been lonely at times, but it was so peaceful. She realized that she was perfectly content just as she was, and the last thing she wanted at this point in her life was a

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man, to complicate her life. She was much happier alone, which proved Jillian's theory. Fiona had been anesthetized by her success. The part of her heart that used to want a man in her life had gone totally, completely numb, or died. And Fiona didn't mind a bit.

## Chapter 6

Marshall and Liz's dinner for his Japanese clients at Gary Danko went off without a hitch, and their guests loved it. The food was exquisite as always, and the men talked business all night, while Liz engaged their wives in conversation, and used the Japanese phrases she'd learned. Marshall was very pleased with the results of the evening, when they drove back to Marin that night after dinner. And he filled Liz in on what the men had discussed. She had listened with half an ear but couldn't follow the conversation closely while talking to the two wives.

'I think we cemented the deal tonight,' Marshall said, looking pleased as they got to Ross. And Liz had been perfect, charming, respectful, discreet. She had handled it flawlessly, just as she always did, and he was grateful to her. And when they went to bed that night, he made love to her, as much out of gratitude and a sense of duty, as out of love. He felt he owed her a lot for the evening. She

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was the perfect wife for his career, and she made him happy in many ways. And he wanted to make love to her to thank her, but as soon as he had, he felt a pang of missing Ashley so severe that it nearly choked him. All he could think of as he held Liz was the woman he had loved in L.A. for the past eight years. He knew every inch of her body, and every ounce of her soul, and she filled him with such desire and longing that he could hardly keep himself from calling her late that night, just to hear her voice.

Everything he felt for Liz was so different. He was grateful for all the things she did for him, to make his life run smoothly, but Ashley was the enchantress who put excitement and spice in his life, and her loving was so tender. After nearly thirty years, his lovemaking with Liz was familiar and mechanical. With Ashley it was fire, and she was twenty years younger than Liz. Being with her made him feel young too, with their little girls close by, who were so thrilled to see him whenever he came home. When he was with Liz, he felt old. But he was constantly aware that he needed them both, in different ways. Neither of them would have been enough on her own.

He lay awake late into the night after they made love, and he finally sent Ashley a text from his bathroom. It was full of all the steamy desire he was feeling for her, and he could hardly wait to see her on Wednesday and make love to her again.

And on Sunday morning he played golf with the two

Japanese men for the second time. And when he left them on Sunday afternoon, they confirmed to him that the deal had been made. It had been a very successful weekend, and he told Liz when he got home. She was pleased and proud of him. She always was.

John came home for dinner that night and brought Alyssa with him, and both his parents liked her very much as they got to know her better. And even Lindsay the Terrible pronounced her 'cool.' She and Alyssa had a long talk about rap music, and Lindsay was impressed by how much she knew. And on the way back to Stanford with John, Alyssa laughed about it and told him his sister was a sweet kid. They sat in his car talking and kissing for a long time when they got back to the campus, before Alyssa went back to her dorm and he to his apartment. Their relationship was going well. And she liked his family a lot. It made her miss having parents who liked each other and got along, which was something she'd never had. The Westons seemed like the perfect couple, and it made her sad for what she didn't have and never would. She thought John was blessed to have parents who were so loving to each other.

Alyssa called her mother to tell her about it on Monday at the office, and Fiona was having an insane day. She had a run-in with Harding Williams when she called him to report on the investigation, and he referred to it as her



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witch hunt again. She lost her temper with him, and was then furious at herself for doing so. She was so tired of his arrogance and pompous attitude with her. She had almost called him an old fool, but had restrained herself. And she was aggravated with herself for letting him get to her. In the end, with one thing and another, it was a stressful day. A typical one for a CEO. Not every day was fun. But she enjoyed hearing from her daughter, even in the midst of it, and took the time to listen to her about her date with John the day before. And it confirmed her good opinion of Marshall Weston if he had such a solid family and nice kids. He was obviously a good guy, which was nice to know, and she was looking forward to meeting his son.

Marshall's day hadn't been nearly as stressful as Fiona's. He was pleased with the Japanese deal he had sealed over the weekend. It was an important one for UPI, and he knew the board and stockholders would be pleased. It had been difficult to consummate for months, and was a major coup for him. He had just finished dictating a report about it to the chairman of the board when Simon Stern, their chief in-house counsel, called and asked him if he could come up to Marshall's office to see him. Marshall told him that he could, and had just finished for the day when Simon walked in, and chatted with him for a few minutes before discreetly closing Marshall's

office door. Marshall couldn't imagine why he'd come, or why he appeared so secretive about it.

As soon as he had closed the door, Simon gazed at Marshall across his desk with grave concern.

'We have a problem,' he said, looking Marshall in the eye. He seemed nervous about what he was about to say, as Marshall waited to hear. What he heard next had been the furthest thing from his mind and took him by surprise.

'We got a call from an attorney today,' Simon explained cautiously, not wanting to anger the CEO. He had no idea what his reaction would be, and he didn't like being the bearer of bad news. 'And apparently, a former employee, a woman named Megan Wheeler, is going to sue you for sexual harassment and wrongful termination. She claims she had an affair with you two years ago, and she says you got her the job and then she believes you had her fired when she ended the affair.' Simon Stern sat looking at him, and waited for Marshall's reaction. Marshall looked like someone had just exploded an atom bomb in his lap. He stared at the attorney in total disbelief.

'Are you serious? Is she insane?' He looked horrified by what the attorney had said, and completely shocked.

'She may be,' Simon said, looking hopeful, still praying it would all go away, but suits like that rarely did. Even if you didn't believe the 'where there's smoke there's

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fire' theory, in his experience women who brought sexual harassment suits were very determined about it, and didn't just disappear. They were usually scorned women who wanted to get even for something, either a badly handled affair or advances that had not been returned. Either way, they were zealous about it most of the time and always wanted vengeance and big money. 'Do you know who she is?'

'I vaguely remember the name,' Marshall admitted. 'I think we hired her to do some client events, but I certainly never had an affair with her. I don't even remember what she looks like. I think she is some kind of party or event planner. We may have put her on staff for a while after the events, and then I lost track of her.'

'She says you had an affair with her for eight months, and met her at a hotel repeatedly. And when she wanted to break it off, you got her fired. And yes, she's a corporate event planner. I don't know why we would have put her on staff instead of keeping her as an independent contractor. She said you suggested the job to her. She got a damn nice salary for it too. I checked with HR, and she was on the payroll for seven months, and then we let her go. Her story matches up with her employment dates, as far as the timing goes.'

'I can promise you, I never slept with her,' Marshall said with a look of desperation. He could see his whole career flashing before his eyes, and about to end in disgrace.

‘She says she has documentation to prove your involvement with her, e-mails and letters from you, I think, where she claims you made sexual references and offers to her.’ He couldn’t imagine that Marshall would have been that stupid, even if he had slept with her, but he had to report to him what her attorney claimed. ‘It gets more complicated than that. Apparently, she’s a breast cancer survivor, which she says you knew, and the laws about firing cancer survivors are even tougher than sexual harassment. If that’s true, she has us over a barrel, and this won’t look good in the press.’ Their house counsel was obviously worried, and Marshall looked sick.

‘The woman is lying. I’ve never written letters to anyone, making sexual offers. Why would I do something like that?’

‘It didn’t sound right to me either. We’ll see what she’s got. She may have written them herself. If so, hopefully we can prove it and scare her off. But for now, they’re being aggressive in the initial attack. Her lawyer sounds like a nasty piece of work. He’s probably a contingency lawyer, and figures that we’ll settle. And if there’s any truth to this, we will, with the board’s approval, of course. They’re not going to want something like this surfacing in the press. Her attorney says they’re serving us next week. I think we need to talk to Connie about this as soon as possible.’ Connie Feinberg was the chairman of UPI’s board. She was a reasonable woman and Marshall

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liked her, but he had no idea how she would react, and neither did Simon Stern. They had never faced a suit like this at a CEO level before. It was new to them, and to Marshall, whose reputation had been squeaky clean till then. Simon knew he was married, a family man, and devoted to his wife and kids. This was going to be hard on them.

‘What does she want?’ Marshall asked in a choked voice. This was not what he wanted happening in a thus-far-flawless career. He had visions of being fired, and his career and reputation destroyed. He was on the verge of tears, particularly when he thought of the impact on Liz and his kids.

‘She wants a million dollars. Her attorney says they’re suing us for five, but he was pretty clear that she’ll settle for one. Something tells me she’s not going to let it go. And he insists it’s a valid claim,’ Simon said unhappily.

‘I can tell you that it’s not. I never slept with this woman. There was no affair. I remember who she was now. She looked like a cheap floozy, but she did several good events for us. I had no idea we even hired her. And I never saw her after the events.’

‘I’m sure you didn’t, Marshall,’ the attorney reassured him. ‘I’m sorry this has come up. Unfortunately, it’s part of the modern world, and there are some very dishonest people out there. We’re all targets for it, particularly in your position.’ Marshall nodded, feeling sick. And as well

as Connie, he would have to warn Liz, in case it appeared in the press. And eventually he'd have to tell Ashley too. And his children. It was a nightmare waiting to happen, and all he wanted to do was wake up.

'I'll give Connie a call. What do we do now?' Marshall asked in a tense voice.

'If there is any truth to it, negotiate like crazy. And if not, just wait and see what she does. Her lawyer said he'd send over copies of the correspondence she claims to have from you, and apparently there are some photographs too. It's probably all bogus. You're not the first CEO this has happened to, and you won't be the last. We're not going to negotiate with her if it's not true, unless the board thinks we should. We need some guidelines from them.' Marshall nodded, and a moment later the attorney left his office and promised to keep him informed.

Marshall sat for a long moment at his desk, with tears in his eyes, and then he called Connie Feinberg at home. She had run a large, respected family-owned corporation for many years. She was a smart woman and an excellent chairman of the board. She was surprised to hear from Marshall, and even more so when he told her what was happening. She sounded upset, but not shocked. She had known of situations like this before. Her own brother had been sued for sexual harassment, so this wasn't entirely unfamiliar to her. And he had won. His accuser had been discredited and withdrawn the suit.

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‘I can promise you it’s not true,’ Marshall said in an anguished tone.

‘I appreciate your calling me, Marshall,’ she said kindly. ‘And I’m very sorry to hear about this. At least she’s not claiming you raped her, and bringing criminal charges against you. I’ve heard of that happening too. With luck, she’ll go away without making too much fuss. And even if there’s no truth to it, it may be smarter for us to negotiate with her and settle for some reasonable amount, just to make her go away. If we do, it’s giving in to extortion, but sometimes it’s smarter to just pay up to protect your reputation, and ours, rather than getting into a swearing contest with some greedy nutcase who may try to take it all the way in court. I’ll arrange a conference call with the board, and let you know how they feel about it. My recommendation would be to pay her off and shut her up before this goes any further.’

‘But wouldn’t that imply that it’s true?’ Marshall asked. ‘I don’t want to admit guilt for something I didn’t do. I have my family to think of too. And UPI, of course. It breaks my heart to cause a problem like this, and it makes me sick to think of costing the company blood money this woman doesn’t deserve.’

‘Sometimes that’s the way our legal system works,’ Connie Feinberg said practically. They both knew that settling lawsuits, whether legitimate or not, was commonplace. She was a sensible woman and not easily

shocked. 'You've been a wonderful asset to this company for fifteen years, ten of them as CEO, and we have an obligation to protect you from people like this. We don't want your reputation hurt any more than ours. And I'm sure this is very distressing to you, your family, and your wife.'

'I haven't told her yet. I just found out ten minutes ago. I called you first,' Marshall said, and Connie thanked him for calling her so quickly.

'Let's just see where this goes, but I think Simon should be prepared to negotiate whatever deal he can, if you'll agree to that.'

'I'll do whatever is best for UPI,' he said in a somber tone, and she thanked him again for letting her know, and promised to call him after her conference call with the board.

He felt dazed as he drove home to Marin County, and wondered what he should tell Liz. Mercifully, Lindsay was out, having dinner at her boyfriend's house, and Liz took one look at him when he walked in and knew something terrible had occurred. He was fighting back tears, and broke down in sobs at the kitchen table when he explained the situation to her.

'I don't understand how something like this can happen. I never even spoke to the woman, and now she's claiming we had an affair and I had her fired. She even said I got her hired by UPI. I barely remember who she is. And the last



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thing I'd ever want to do is hurt UPI, and you, and our kids.' He was completely unglued by the accusation, and Liz held him in her arms while he cried. It took him half an hour to regain his composure, and Liz assured him that she didn't believe a word of the woman's claim.

'We'll see it through, Marsh, whatever it takes. You know you didn't do it.' She had total faith in him, and he could see it, which was comforting for him. They were sitting at the kitchen table holding hands when Connie Feinberg called him, after talking to the other members of the board.

'I just want to assure you, Marshall, that the board will back you one hundred percent. You're too important to us to let you down on something like this. We'll do whatever it takes. I'll speak to Simon myself tomorrow. And we're all in agreement, we want to negotiate with this woman as soon as possible, and buy out of this mess as quickly and as quietly as we can. We don't want to get aggressive with her, and have her go to the press.'

'I can't thank you enough,' Marshall said in a voice filled with gratitude and emotion.

He and Liz talked about it quietly until Lindsay came home, and then they went upstairs to bed. They didn't say anything to her, and agreed that it was too soon to say anything to the children, and there was no point upsetting them if the matter could be handled internally without the public ever finding out.

It was the worst thing that had ever happened to him, and he was terrified that his career was about to go down the tubes and everything he had built for UPI, and personally, would be destroyed. He was horrified by his accuser's claims and badly shaken. He hardly slept that night and was awake before dawn. He lay there for a long time, not wanting to disturb Liz, and then got out of bed and stood and watched the sun come up.

'You're up?' Liz asked when she saw him and he nodded.

'I'm scared,' he said softly.

'You'll be okay,' she said, coming to stand with him, and put her arms around him.

'I don't deserve you,' he said humbly.

'Yes, you do,' she insisted, and believed it with her whole heart.

Liz held him in her arms again for a long moment before he left for work that day, and assured him of how much she loved him, and that he had her full support. She never wavered for an instant, and he thanked her again. And on the way to work that morning, in the Aston Martin, Marshall took comfort in knowing that the board was behind him, and trusted him. He knew that despite what had happened, he was a lucky man. And all he wanted to do now was get this over with and put it behind him as fast as he could.

## Chapter 7

Marshall didn't leave for L.A. on Wednesday that week. Instead, two days after he learned of Megan Wheeler's accusation, she and her attorney came to a conference room at UPI in the morning, to meet with Marshall and Simon Stern. She sat across the table from Marshall and her eyes bored into his. Her attorney repeated her accusation, and stuck to her story about their affair. She didn't hesitate or even appear nervous as she listened to what he said and nodded confirmation. She did not try to avoid Marshall's eyes, and she wore a tight black dress and stiletto heels to the meeting. She had made no attempt to look demure, and had done everything possible to show off her spectacular figure. She looked racy and overdressed for an early-morning business meeting, but she was also very attractive. She was a good-looking woman, somewhere in her late thirties. And halfway through the meeting, her attorney handed a

manila envelope to Simon Stern, after reiterating the damages his client had sustained from being fired from her job. He claimed that she had closed her own party-planning business after being hired by UPI, and had been unable to get it going again, after she was let go. And he spoke of her emotional distress from their affair, as the muscles tensed in Marshall's jaw.

Simon carefully opened the envelope and took two letters out of it, and copies of several emails, all allegedly written to her by Marshall. He read them expressionlessly, and then handed them to Marshall for him to read as well. The letters were written on a computer, and none of the missives were personally signed.

'How do we know Ms. Wheeler didn't write these herself, to falsely incriminate Mr. Weston?' The letters were full of sexual references to nights they had spent together, and the sexual acts they had engaged in. They were painfully explicit. And then her attorney handed Simon the pièce de résistance, a smaller envelope that contained two photographs of Marshall's accuser stark naked in suggestive positions, taken by a man you could see clearly in a mirror. It appeared to be Marshall, equally naked, and another one of him alone, also naked, and apparently asleep on a bed. It was undeniable evidence that they had been together in a sexual way. Simon handed the photographs to Marshall without a word. And nothing about the photographs appeared to have

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been doctored. They were taken with a proper camera, not her cell phone, and the man in the photographs was Marshall.

Marshall's face was pale as he sat across the table from her with no sign of acknowledgment or recognition. And she met his eyes without flinching. This was business to her and nothing else. There was no talk of broken promises, broken hearts, or unrequited love. This was blackmail, pure and simple. They had had sex with each other, he had hired and then fired her, and she was seeking revenge. Her anger had a price, a big one.

Simon reacted immediately, as he put the photographs back in the envelope. They were only copies, and it was obvious that she had kept the negatives. They were the best bargaining chip she had.

'We are prepared to offer Ms. Wheeler a million dollars for her time and trouble, in exchange for complete confidentiality about this affair and a retraction of her accusations against Mr. Weston,' Simon said to her attorney. The board had given their permission to go as high as two million. Marshall was worth it to them, as the most competent CEO they'd ever had. He was the best thing that had ever happened to UPI. They didn't care if he was innocent or guilty, all they wanted was for Megan Wheeler to disappear, preferably before she went to the press. She had waited just over a year to come forward after the affair ended and she'd been fired. And the

attorney she had consulted had convinced her to threaten a suit, and shoot for a handsome settlement. Her attorney looked unimpressed by Simon's offer, and then gave them another piece of stunning news.

'I think we should tell you that we issued a statement to the press this morning, that Mr. Weston had an affair with my client and caused her to be fired from UPI after she ended it, and we are suing for sexual harassment and damages.' It was a simple factual statement of their intentions, devoid of emotion. The attorney looked sleazy but was smart, and so was Megan Wheeler.

Marshall looked instantly ill, and Simon tried not to react and didn't glance at his client.

'That seems like an extremely unwise thing to have done, and premature, while we are trying to negotiate with you in good faith.'

'There is no good faith here,' her attorney said bluntly. 'Your client had sex with mine, as CEO of this company. He used his influence and power to get her hired, possibly to induce her to have sex with him, and then to get her fired when she stopped. And she had had chemotherapy and radiation for breast cancer six months before, which she told him. It seems pretty clear cut to me. She is a cancer survivor, and he took gross advantage of her.'

'What seems clear-cut to me is that Ms. Wheeler wants to be paid a great deal of money for having had sex with

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my client. There's a name for that. Extortion, or worse,' Simon said with a steely look at the opposing attorney. 'And giving a statement to the press about it is only going to make this harder. You've already damaged my client's reputation. Why should we pay you anything now?' He had a point. 'If we agree to pay your client anything, we will expect her to recant what she said, and admit publicly that her claims against Mr. Weston were false. We will want the negatives of those photographs and the original letters. And we will offer her two million, and that's our final offer.' Simon Stern seemed as though he meant it and gave Marshall a look that told him to remain silent. And Marshall could see pleasure register in Megan Wheeler's eyes. She saw pure hatred in his. They never exchanged a word.

'Your CEO's reputation should be worth a lot more,' the lawyer said, trying to figure out how far he could go, but he hit a wall with his tactic. Simon had run out of patience. He wasn't happy with the situation Marshall had put them in, but it was his job to get him out of it, not to pass judgment, which was also the wish of the board, which had vowed to support Marshall against the claim.

'We don't pay blackmail,' Simon said quietly. 'We negotiate. We just did. Two million, and that's it, or we'll go to trial on this, and win.' With the photographs he knew they wouldn't. Simon was bluffing, but he wouldn't

budge an inch. And Megan Wheeler didn't want to take the chance of losing the money, nor did her lawyer.

'As a breast cancer survivor, I think Ms. Wheeler deserves at least three.'

'He didn't give her cancer,' Simon said as he stood up and signaled to Marshall to do the same. The meeting was over. They started to leave the conference table, and the other lawyer looked at his client and she nodded. She wanted the money. Two million was enough for her.

'We accept your offer,' her lawyer said quickly.

'I assume the story is all over the press and the Internet by now. I expect a full retraction from your client by end of business today,' Simon said coldly. 'With a signed confidentiality agreement,' he added.

'As soon as we have the check,' the attorney said, and stood up too.

'I'll take care of it right away,' Simon said, and left the room with Marshall just behind him. They rode up in the elevator in silence, and didn't speak until they got to Marshall's office.

'I'm sorry,' Marshall said in a choked voice to the attorney. 'I had no idea she had those pictures. I must have been drunk out of my mind. Maybe she drugged me,' he said weakly, and Simon didn't comment. She hadn't drugged him for eight months, or forced him to give her a job. It was a nasty situation and had just cost UPI two million dollars for his little fling. Personally, he



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didn't like what had happened, nor Marshall lying to him about it, but it was not his place to judge him, just to solve the problem. 'I'll call Connie right away,' Marshall said quietly as Simon nodded and left his office. He had to draw up the agreement for Megan Wheeler to sign. He had promised to messenger it to her attorney's office by that afternoon.

Calling Connie Feinberg to tell her what had happened was one of the worst calls Marshall had ever made. He had no choice now but to tell her the truth, and he offered to pay the two million dollars himself.

'If you do, it will eventually come out that you did, and that will implicate you further and cause a bigger scandal. I think our only recourse here is to pay her the money, and have her retract her accusations publicly. It makes more sense for UPI to settle with her than for you to do it. Corporations settle legal claims to avoid lawsuits, whether bogus or not. If you pay her, it sounds like blackmail. If we pay her, you won't look as guilty, it's just another lawsuit. We can take it out of your bonus at the end of the year, if that's what the board decides and you're amenable to it.' It was a rap on the knuckles, instead of something far worse, and sounded reasonable to him, and he was more than willing to lose two million of his annual bonus to save his neck and career, and grateful for it. 'I think, more than likely,' she said quietly, 'the board will decide that this episode is the price to pay for an

exceptionally competent CEO. These things have happened at other companies, and everyone survives. People will forget it in the end.' Her voice was cool and calm. It was obvious that she wasn't happy with the situation, but the board had agreed to support him unconditionally, and she was relieved it hadn't cost them more, which it easily could have, if the Wheeler woman and her attorney had been even greedier.

'I don't know how to tell you how grateful I am, and how sorry. I promise you that nothing like it will ever happen again.'

'I'm sure it won't,' she said kindly. 'I know that these things happen. But let's hope it never does again. It was an expensive mistake. I'm going to have Simon write the statement for her to give to the press, retracting her accusations.'

'I think he's working on it now.'

'We'll have to let the stockholders know that we paid her a settlement to avoid the time, expense, and bad publicity of a lawsuit. And she retracted her false claims, and we're considering the expense an early installment of your bonus, from what you'd get at the end of the year anyway.' It was far less than his projected bonus, so it shouldn't upset anyone unduly. What he wanted to be sure of now was that Liz would never know his accuser's claims had been true. He could tell Liz that they had been forced to settle with her to avoid further scandal and a

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lengthy lawsuit. But he would say nothing about the photographs and letters. There was no reason Liz would ever know, and his reputation would be salvaged. All they had to live through now was the scandal in the press for a few hours until she made her statement, hopefully by the end of the day.

He called Liz after he spoke to Connie, and warned her that there would be some ugly stories in the press that day, as part of the pressure Wheeler was putting on him to settle, but they would be recanted by tonight or tomorrow, and the threatened suit had been settled, and she had gotten honest and was retracting her claim.

‘Is everything okay?’ Liz asked, sounding panicked.

‘It will be soon. She wouldn’t back down unless we paid her a settlement. It’s extortion, but the board doesn’t want to deal with a lawsuit, even if we won. It will all be over soon. And you’d better warn the kids about what will be on the news today. You can tell them it was all a lie.’ What mattered most to him was that Liz believed him and would never know the truth. Of that he was now sure. And after he spoke to Liz, he called Ashley from his office. He warned her of what would be on the news that day, and he said it was all posturing over a threatened lawsuit, based on a false claim of sexual harassment, made by a disgruntled employee who had been fired, and tried to take revenge on him for it. It sounded sensible to him and was a plausible explanation for what had happened.

‘What the hell is that about?’ Ashley said, instantly suspicious. But Marshall was calm now. The nightmare was almost over. And he sounded quiet and confident when he answered. He was no longer frightened or panicked, now that he knew his career wasn’t at stake.

‘It’s just an employee who tried to extort money from us. It happens. We were forced to settle with her, to get rid of her, and she’s going to admit later today that her claims were false.’

‘Were they? Or did you have to buy her off because she was telling the truth?’ Ashley asked the right questions, but Marshall had ready answers.

‘If she were telling the truth, she wouldn’t have settled and would have won the suit. We would have won in court, but the board didn’t want to go through it,’ Marshall said matter-of-factly. ‘I never had an affair with her, Ashley. Her accusations were false. Liz believes me. And so does the board. I hope you do too.’ He sounded faintly hurt that she was doubting him at all, and she hesitated for a long moment before she answered.

‘I know you better than Liz does. I know you’re capable of having an affair and lying to her about it.’ Her argument was hard to refute, and he didn’t try.

‘I don’t consider us an affair,’ Marshall said, sounding offended. ‘We’ve lasted longer than most marriages. We have two children, and hopefully a future. This woman came out of left field, and is nothing more than a bimbo

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with a sleazy lawyer trying to extort money. Women like her do that.'

'I hope you're telling me the truth,' Ashley said sadly.

'I don't need to sleep with anyone but you,' he said in a voice filled with emotion. 'I'll be in L.A. tomorrow. We can talk about it then. I just wanted to let you know what would be on the news today, and not to worry about it.' He sounded innocent and reassuring, and very loving.

'Thank you,' she said, but her tone was as confused as she felt. And when she saw it on the noon news an hour later, despite his warnings, she felt sick. The story had the ring of truth to her. And Bonnie called her five minutes later. She had just seen it on the Internet.

'What the hell is going on with Marshall?' Bonnie was stunned.

'Marshall says the woman is crazy, and tried to extort money from him. She's an employee they fired and she's pissed about it, so she drummed up a sexual harassment suit to shake the company down for money,' Ashley explained, as Marshall had to her earlier. 'They just made a settlement with her, and she's going to admit her claims were false by the end of the day. I guess it's what people do to large corporations. They sue, so they can settle and get money.'

'I wonder what that cost them,' Bonnie said cynically, and Ashley didn't want to concede to her that she didn't know what to believe and had her doubts about it too. He

seemed like he was telling her the truth when he said he had never had an affair with her, but she no longer knew what to believe, or who. Hearing about it on TV had shaken Ashley's faith in him.

By two o'clock the check had been drawn up and delivered to Megan Wheeler's attorney, and she had signed the agreement, of both confidentiality and retraction. And her statement clearing Marshall was released in time to make the five o'clock news. The story had come and gone in a single day. And everyone knew that claims like that were occasionally made against the heads of major corporations, or men in power generally, and were often false. And sometimes true.

The board had asked Marshall to hold a press conference at the end of the day, after her announcement, which he did, with a pained look, wearing a well-cut dark suit, a white shirt, and a sober tie, with Liz standing beside him. He issued a brief statement, expressing his gratitude for the support of UPI, the board, to Ms. Wheeler for ultimately telling the truth and admitting his innocence, and thanking his wife for her support. He smiled at Liz as he said it, and she looked dignified and loving. The camera zoomed in on their clasped hands then, and as Ashley watched them in L.A., she started to cry. Liz looked so peaceful and proud next to him, as though she had no cause for concern whatsoever. He

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smiled at her as they left the stage, and she followed him off camera. She looked like a confident, respectable woman who was standing by her husband. And as Ashley watched them, she knew what Bonnie would say, and maybe she was right, that he would never leave his wife. It certainly looked that way to her, and she could see the profound respect between them. She sat gulping air as she choked on sobs with a feeling of panic, and suddenly she knew instinctively that he had probably had the affair, UPI had more than likely paid to buy him out of the scandal, and he was far more married to Liz than he had ever admitted to her. She felt as though her whole world were crashing in on her. It all sounded like a lie to her now that she had seen him holding hands with Liz and the proud, assured look in her eyes. It was obvious that Liz believed her husband, but Ashley no longer did. She knew that in one brief moment, watching Liz stand next to Marshall on TV, her world had come to an end. She would never fully believe him again, or trust what he said about his allegedly dead marriage. It didn't look dead to her.

Marshall spoke to all of their children on the phone that night and explained the situation to them about the threatened lawsuit, the settlement to avoid it, at UPI's request, and Megan Wheeler's admission that her claims against him had been false. Lindsay said it was embarrassing, John offered his sympathy and support,

and Tom didn't believe him, but didn't want to upset his mother by challenging them and accusing his father of being a liar and a cheat. Marshall could hear it in his tone and curt responses on the phone.

It was all over by seven o'clock that night. Marshall called Connie again to thank her and the board for supporting him, and Connie said that it had been worth it to avoid a scandal for UPI. They had done what they felt was best. And everyone was relieved that it had been resolved so quickly, despite the price.

Marshall went to bed that night, thinking of Ashley, and knowing that he would have to deal with her in L.A. the next day. But the worst was over. And most important, he hadn't lost his job or been publicly disgraced. He had been vindicated. And Liz lay in bed next to him, looking tired but reassured. She had never wavered for a moment and trusted him completely.

'It has certainly been an insane couple of days,' he said as they lay in the dark, thinking about it again.

'Things like this happen,' Liz said quietly, grateful that it was over and the woman had finally told the truth. It would have been a lot worse for all of them if she hadn't. But at no time had Liz doubted him. She was absolutely certain that Marshall was telling her the truth the entire time, and all she had felt was compassion that he had to go through it, and total faith in him.

Marshall felt like he'd had a near-death experience, and



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knew just how narrowly he had escaped. He closed his eyes then, and with an overwhelming sense of relief, he fell asleep. The nightmare was over, and all he wanted to do now was get back to Ashley, see their babies, and put his arms around her. It had been an agonizing three days. But all was well, and he was safe.

## Chapter 8

Marshall boarded the UPI jet for the flight to L.A., a day later than usual, still shaken by everything that had happened. He had brought a briefcase full of paperwork with him on the plane, but never touched it. He just sat staring out the window, thinking of Ashley, and trying to force the vision of Megan Wheeler from his mind. It was frightening to realize how easily she could have brought him down, how close she had come to doing so. His name had been cleared, thanks to UPI's support. He was a chastened man, and was well aware that his brief fling with Megan Wheeler had been a huge mistake. It had all started one night when they both had too much to drink at a client event, met for another drink afterward, and it had snowballed from there. Thank God she had recanted. She could have brought about the end of his career, and his marriage.

When the plane landed in L.A., he didn't go to his

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office, and had the car and driver drop him off at his apartment instead. He didn't bother to change, but picked up the Jaguar and headed for Malibu on Pacific Coast Highway. It was a hot, sunny day, and he had taken off his coat and tie, and put the top down, and as always drove too fast. He was anxious to see Ashley now, and calm her down, after their unsettling conversation the day before. He had sent her two text messages late that night, and again this morning, and she hadn't answered.

He parked in front of the garage at the house in Malibu and saw that her car was there. He was relieved that she was home and the kids were at camp. He hadn't wanted to wait until that night to talk to her. The only thing he was afraid of now was her reaction to the affair he had been accused of. He could tell that she hadn't believed him, when he said he was innocent of the Wheeler woman's claims. And the only ones who knew the truth now were Megan herself, Simon Stern, and the board of UPI, and no one would ever mention it again. They had all signed confidentiality agreements, binding them to silence, and she had turned over the negatives of the photographs.

He found Ashley in the studio in a white T-shirt and pink denim shorts. She was holding a mug of tea, and staring blindly out the window, and didn't hear him come in. She felt his hand on her arm, and knew who it was, but she didn't turn to see him. She didn't want to. All she

could think of was seeing him with Liz on TV, holding hands. And then slowly, she looked at him, and he could see her beautiful, ravaged face, that showed all the agony she felt.

‘Why aren’t you in the office?’ she asked in a broken voice. She felt as though her heart had been shattered in a million pieces the day before, first by the affair he’d been accused of, and then by the sight of his holding hands with Liz at the press conference, as she stood staunchly beside him, the loving wife who Ashley always tried to pretend didn’t exist. But she did, and Ashley had seen clearly how much Liz cared about him, and Marshall’s hand on hers had spoken volumes.

‘I wanted to see you,’ he said quietly, and pulled up a stool to sit beside her. ‘I’m sorry I had to call and tell you about the threatened lawsuit yesterday. It upset me too. It’s all over.’ His voice was warm and reassuring.

‘I know,’ she said, as she set the mug of tea down and looked at him. She didn’t know if she was seeing him, or a stranger. Suddenly, he looked different to her. ‘I saw your press conference last night. How much did they have to pay her to withdraw the suit?’

‘Two million dollars,’ he said honestly. ‘It’s an advance on my end-of-the-year bonus. We would have won the suit, but they didn’t want the bad publicity. It was just easier to settle. That’s how those things work. Sometimes you have to settle even false claims. That was what she

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wanted. I hate giving her a penny for lying about me, but at least it's over. It would have been a nightmare fighting it in court.' Ashley nodded and said nothing. He didn't ask her if she believed him. He could see she didn't.

'So when did you have the affair with her?' Ashley dragged her eyes to his, and they burned into him like hot coals.

'I told you. I didn't. She got fired, and she was angry about it. She decided to take it out on me. It was a cheap shot, but it worked.'

'I don't believe you,' Ashley said quietly in a voice he had never heard before. It frightened him to look at her – she looked as though she were a million miles away. He wanted to put his arms around her to bring her back again, but he didn't dare. She looked like she might bolt, or scream.

'I know you don't, Ash,' he said just as quietly. 'But I didn't sleep with her. I don't even know her.' His mind shut out the letters and the photographs. All he could think of now was Ashley, and the relationship he was trying to save, just as he had fought to save his job the day before, and his marriage, whatever it took.

'You lied to me about Liz too,' she said with heart-broken eyes. 'You said your marriage is over, and has been for years.'

'I was telling you the truth about that too. It still is. Our marriage has been dead for years.'

‘You were holding her hand on TV. I saw it,’ Ashley said as tears rolled down her cheeks, and he gently brushed one away. She didn’t move toward him, nor pull away. She looked like a beautiful statue with soft curly hair. And he didn’t try to explain why he was holding his wife’s hand the day before.

‘This was hard on her too. It was public humiliation for all of us. The company, my family, Liz, me, you. That woman hit us all where we live.’ He looked angry as he said it. ‘And I hate that it hurt you too,’ he said sympathetically.

‘It hurt just as much watching you hold hands with Liz. Your marriage isn’t dead. She looked like all those politicians’ wives who stand next to their husbands while they deny having affairs, or confess publicly and cry about it. And the wife forgives him publicly to make him look good. She loves you. I realized that for the first time yesterday. And you love her. I saw it in your eyes when you looked at her. You’re still totally married to her. That’s why you’ve never left her. You lied to me. It’s not about your kids. It’s about you and her. There’s no room in your life for me.’

‘I wouldn’t be here now, Ash, if there weren’t,’ he said gently. ‘I love you and our girls more than anything in the world. And when Lindsay leaves next year, I’ll be ready. And so will Liz. I think she knows it’s coming. My heart hasn’t been there for years. This was different. It was a

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highly publicized assault on all of us. We had to make it look good.'

'Your holding hands with Liz looked real to me,' she said, as she got up and walked away and stood staring out the window. Marshall came up behind her and put his arms around her, and she didn't move.

'It wasn't real,' he assured her in a whisper. 'It was for TV. *This* is real. You and I are real, and we always will be.'

'What about the other woman?' she asked, as he stood behind her with his arms around her waist. Her fluff of curly hair was brushing his chin, and he could smell her shampoo, and the fresh clean smell he loved about her, a combination of soap and faint perfume.

'What about her?' Marshall said, debating what to tell her. There was suddenly a lot at stake here, and he knew it.

'Tell me the truth. Don't lie to me. I know you slept with her. I can feel it.' She turned and looked him in the eye, and her gaze didn't waver.

He hesitated for a long moment, and then decided to tell her the truth, a version of it. She didn't have to know about the photographs, or how long it had lasted. He didn't want to hurt her any more than he already had, which in his mind justified modifying the truth for her. It was more than he was willing to tell Liz. But the circumstances here were different. Ashley was aware of things Liz didn't know, that he was unfaithful and didn't always tell the truth.

‘It was a one-night stand, and I was drunk out of my mind. It happened two years ago, when you and I were fighting, and I was upset. That’s all it was, Ash, a one-time fling, and I never saw her again.’ There had been a time two years before when Ashley had threatened to leave him if he wouldn’t get divorced. Then Lindsay had had a crisis, Liz had gotten sick, which turned out to be less serious than they thought, the twins had started school, and Ashley had calmed down. Until now. But by reminding her of the timing, Marshall thought it might make sense to her.

‘How do I know you’re telling me the truth?’ she said suspiciously, but she remembered the time, and it was conceivable to her that he had slipped, although she never would have done that herself.

‘You don’t,’ he said candidly. ‘But you know I love you. That’s why I’m here.’

‘Yeah,’ she said, as tears rolled down her cheeks again, ‘and you love Liz too. I could see it.’ She started to sob then and buried her face in his chest as he held her. She loved him so much, and now she was afraid they would never be together as she had hoped. He was married to a real woman and Ashley had seen that she loved him too.

‘I respect Liz,’ Marshall said as he held Ashley. ‘We have a lot of history together, nearly thirty years, and three kids.’

‘We have eight, and two kids. That counts for



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something too,' Ashley said, feeling pathetic for even saying it to him. And as she did, he tipped her face up to his and kissed her.

'We have a lot more than that. We have something very special, Ash, that I've never had with anyone else.' It hadn't stopped him from sleeping with Megan Wheeler, Ashley knew now, but at least he had been honest with her about it, or so she thought. 'And one of these days, we'll be together. I just want to get Lindsay through high school and out of the house. Then it will be our turn.' But she wondered now if it ever would be, and now she was questioning if Liz would really let him go. She had been so staunch beside him at the press conference. It had been obvious that for Liz their marriage wasn't dead, and Marshall was still her man. But he was Ashley's too.

Ashley didn't answer him, and he kissed her then, and the next thing she knew he was holding her so tight she could hardly breathe, their clothes were off, and they couldn't get enough of each other. It happened as it always did, and this time they never made it to her bedroom, they made love on the small battered couch in her studio. And whenever they made love, she forgot everything she was afraid of in their relationship, all the times he had disappointed her. She forgot everything in his arms, and afterward they lay together, and it all came back to her. She couldn't get the image of his wife out of her head now, and the realization that she was nothing to

him, just the woman he made love to in L.A. and slept with two days a week. Nothing else about their life was real, except the twins.

He showered and dressed for the office after he made love to her, and he had to rush. He had a luncheon appointment, and he had put everything aside while he was with her. He could see that she felt better, but when he looked at her closely, he was aware of a worried look when he kissed her goodbye.

'I love you. That's all you need to know.' She nodded, feeling dazed by everything he'd said and their love-making. She couldn't think clearly when she was around him, and he kissed her again. 'See you tonight.' He was only going to be able to spend one night in Malibu that week, because he had been busy dealing with the sexual harassment suit. She would have liked him to spend Friday night with them, to make up for it. But she knew he never could. He always went home for the weekends, which frightened her now too. He said he played golf on Saturdays with clients, but now she wondered what else he did with Liz. The vision of their clasped hands at the press conference was still haunting her, and maybe always would. She had gotten a glimpse into his married life that she had never had before.

She heard the old Jaguar drive off, and went upstairs to shower. She was just coming downstairs in her T-shirt and shorts again when Bonnie showed up. She had gotten

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hired to work on another movie, but she wasn't starting for two more weeks.

'Is Prince Charming in town?' Bonnie asked as she looked at her, and helped herself to a Coke from the fridge.

'He got here today,' Ashley said quietly. She didn't want to get in an argument with Bonnie over him. And recent events in his life were hard to defend, especially now that she knew the truth, that he had cheated on her, even if it was a one-night stand. 'He's leaving tomorrow.'

'I saw his press conference last night,' Bonnie said, as they went to sit outside on the deck. It was a hot day, and both women looked like kids as they lay on deck chairs in the sun.

'Yeah, me too.' Neither of them commented on his wife standing with him, but Bonnie knew Ashley must have seen it too, and their holding hands.

'It sounds like he got out of it pretty cleanly. They must have paid her a bundle to take back what she said,' Bonnie said.

'Maybe so.' Ashley didn't want to discuss it with her, but as she lay on the deck near her friend, Ashley's heart sank, at the realization of what had really happened. Marshall had cheated on her, and he had a wife who was willing to stand by him through thick and thin, and he had just told her that morning that he couldn't leave his wife for another year, until their daughter graduated. He

had said as much to Ashley before, but it was different now that she had seen how Liz looked at him, and how Marshall looked at her. It was a much stronger bond between them than Ashley had realized, and one which she felt no power to interfere with. And it was a tie that had not yet been severed and maybe never would be. She wasn't angry about it anymore, just sad.

'You okay, Ash?' Bonnie asked her friend gently, and Ashley shrugged.

'More or less.' Bonnie suspected what was troubling her. She had seen the same connection between Liz and Marshall that Ashley had the day before. It didn't surprise Bonnie, and had confirmed her worst fears, and now she was even sadder for her friend.

'Why don't we do something with the girls this weekend? Maybe take them to Venice, or go to Disneyland or something. You look like you need a break.' More than that, she needed to have some fun, instead of sitting at home obsessing over Marshall, crying about him, or waiting for him to come to L.A. for a day or two. Ashley needed a lot more in her life.

'Yeah, maybe,' Ashley said without enthusiasm. The last two days had left her feeling depressed. It was hard to rev up her motors again. All her tires were flat.

'You have a choice, you know,' Bonnie said softly. She always tried to be the voice of reason for Ashley, out of friendship, but she never got anywhere. 'You don't have

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to stand by him forever if it's killing you. You can get out of it, or even go to a shrink to help you do it, if you can't do it alone.'

'I know,' Ashley said as she started to cry again. She felt as though she had done nothing but cry for the past two days. Seeing him on TV with Liz had been too hard, and a revelation she had never wanted to face. She had never even seen a photograph of her till then, in eight years. She was twenty years older than Ashley, but she was still a pretty woman, in a suburban-soccer-mom kind of way. And in her simple black dress, she had looked like the perfect corporate wife that she was, something Ashley knew she could never be. She wondered now if that was why he stayed with her too, not just for the kids. 'I don't really have a choice,' Ashley said to Bonnie then. And maybe Liz didn't either. Ashley wondered about that now too.

'Why not?' Bonnie looked puzzled and hoped she wasn't pregnant again. It would just tie her to him even more.

'I love him too much,' Ashley said, as she brushed away her tears, and the wind blew her curls and framed her face with them. She looked like an exquisite angelic child, and not just the vulnerable woman that she was. 'I can't leave him. I would die.'

'He may destroy you if you stay,' Bonnie said seriously.

'I know,' Ashley said, looking straight at her, and the

worst of it was that she seemed as though she did know, and was completely lucid about how dangerous he was for her.

‘Don’t let him wreck your life,’ Bonnie begged her, and Ashley nodded, and for a long time they lay on the deck, soaking up the sun and saying nothing at all. Bonnie was even more frightened for her now than she had been before. And she knew, looking at Ashley, that Marshall Weston owned her, body and soul. He was a man of extraordinary powers. And Ashley was like a feather on the wind, and no match for him at all.

## Chapter 9

Fiona was still waiting for answers from the investigation service that was analyzing the board and checking on its members, when she got a call from a well-known investigative business reporter the day after Marshall Weston's press conference about the sexual harassment suit. The reporter's name was Logan Smith, and she knew his name and had read his pieces for years, which were frequently in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and business and financial magazines. He was best known for his incisive points of view, sometimes unpopular ones. He had fearlessly exposed money-laundering operations and corruption, and he wrote best about controversial issues. And she vaguely remembered that he had won a Pulitzer, although she didn't know exactly what for. She had no idea why he'd be calling her, and hoped it wasn't about the leak. At first she wasn't inclined to take the call, she didn't like talking to the press. And then she decided

that avoiding him might be even more dangerous. So she picked up the receiver, and answered with a slightly harassed voice. She was even more so than her tone indicated.

‘Fiona Carson,’ she said, sounding curt. But she was the CEO and could afford to be prickly at times. She had a huge amount of responsibility to contend with.

‘Hello, Ms. Carson, my name is Logan Smith.’ She smiled to herself. His name was as well known in the business community as her own. She wasn’t sure if he was being modest or showing off. It could have been either one. He had a deep, pleasant voice, and sounded young. She had no idea how old he was. All she knew about him was the Pulitzer and the articles she’d read, some of which could be acutely hostile to big business. He left no stone unturned in the course of his in-depth reporting, no matter how uncomfortable it made his subject. He was a seeker of the truth, and often acted as though he was on a holy mission.

‘Yes, I know who you are,’ she said, with a look of amusement. ‘That’s why I took the call. What can I do for you, Mr. Smith?’

‘I wondered if you have any comment about the recent sexual harassment charges made against Marshall Weston by a former employee. I’m writing a piece about the sexual habits, liberties, and sometimes perversities of men in power. Any thoughts?’ She almost winced at his words.



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The last thing she wanted to do was comment about another CEO's sexual habits, and she didn't know the man.

'I thought the former employee retracted her claim against him yesterday. Isn't that old news today?'

'Not really. And yes, she did recant, although we'll never know exactly why. A lot of behind-the-scenes fancy footwork goes on, cleaning up those claims, as we both know. He may have paid her off. They said there was a "settlement" to avoid litigation. But you know what that means.'

'Fortunately, I don't. I've never had sexual harassment charges brought against me in the workplace or anywhere else.'

'Actually, that's one of my theories,' he said, sounding pleasant and warming to the subject, 'that women never engage in those activities. When was the last time you heard about a female CEO involved in a sex scandal, or sleeping with a male bimbo? What about Weston? Do you think her claim against him was valid, or just a ploy for money and she withdrew because she didn't have a case?' It was anyone's guess, and they'd never know. Fiona felt herself instantly on thin ice with his questions, a place where she did not want to be. But she was much too smart for that.

'I have absolutely no idea,' she said innocently. 'I don't even know the man.'

‘You’ve never met him?’ Logan sounded surprised. ‘Don’t CEOs go out and play together occasionally, or have a secret handshake or a clubhouse somewhere where they hang out?’ She laughed. He was funny, and bright. But that also made him more dangerous, and she didn’t plan to enter his game.

‘I wish we did. That would be fun. Actually, I’ve met Marshall Weston a few times, at Senate subcommittee hearings in Washington where we both appeared. We shook hands on the way in, and that was it. I have no idea what his habits are, and no interest in them. Nor if the allegations against him were true or not.’

‘How disappointing,’ Logan Smith said honestly. ‘I was hoping I could lull you into a little loose-lipped indiscretion about him. Some nice friendly gossip among rivals.’

‘We’re not rivals,’ she corrected him. ‘We have similar jobs for two very different companies. And I hear he does an excellent job.’

‘And you’re not loose-lipped either. My efforts to pry inappropriate information from you have been a total bust.’ She laughed aloud at that. ‘What do you think about my theory, about the difference between male and female CEOs and their sexual habits?’ She wasn’t going to give him a quote on that either. In fact, she wasn’t going to give him anything, except two minutes of her time on the phone, no comment, and then send him on his way and wish him well.

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‘You should talk to my sister,’ Fiona said pleasantly, ‘Jillian Hamilton. She’s a psychiatrist at Stanford. She’s writing a book on the subject. She’s as fascinated by it as you are, and said pretty much the same thing to me.’

‘In what context? About anyone we know?’ He was looking to hang his hat on something, and Fiona had given him nothing so far, although he liked talking to her. She sounded easygoing and very intelligent. Her sister probably was too.

‘About men and women in general. And she claims that she uses me as a guinea pig for her research, about female CEOs.’

‘And what’s her conclusion?’ he asked with interest.

‘That we work just as hard, don’t have nearly as much fun as our male counterparts, and are better behaved.’

‘That’s my point,’ he said, sounding excited. ‘I think your sister and I are really on to something. Guys in power seem to go berserk, and it becomes sexual for them. For women it becomes like some sort of vow of chastity and dedication. They don’t do anything but work.’ And then he came right back to his topic. ‘So you’ve got nothing to say about Marshall Weston?’ he tried again, and she didn’t volunteer that her daughter was dating his son. It was none of his business anyway, and might make him think she knew him better than she did, which was not at all. All she actually knew about him was that he had a nice kid, according to Alyssa.

'I wouldn't presume to comment about a man I don't know,' she said wisely.

'That never stops anyone else,' he said, laughing.

'Would you like to talk to my sister about her book? Maybe the two of you can share ideas.'

'Not yet,' Smith said honestly, 'although I might like to interview her eventually, about her book, and how she arrived at her theories. Mine come from careful observation and writing about the heads of corporations for many years. Actually, there is something else I want to ask you.' She hoped it wouldn't be about her sex life. If so, she wasn't going to answer him. 'What about letting me do an in-depth profile of you? I've wanted to for years.' She was startled by what he said, although she had had numerous requests. There had been one piece about her in *Time* magazine when she first took the job, in the business section, but usually she declined interviews. She didn't want the spotlight on her. It was unnecessary and she didn't like it.

'That's very flattering, Mr. Smith,' she responded, 'but I don't think so. I'm not much for publicity. I prefer to stay behind the scenes and do the work. That works better for me.'

'That's why you're so interesting,' he explained. 'I've been watching you for years. I never hear about you, one rarely reads of you. You just run the corporation with incredible efficiency, and go about your business. And the

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value of the NTA stock goes up every five minutes. As a matter of fact, the only money I've ever made in the stock market was thanks to you.'

'I'm happy to hear it.' She smiled at the compliment, which was the only kind she was interested in, about her skill in business. 'But that's really all the public needs to know. If I'm doing my job right, that's all anyone needs to hear about. Where I went to school, what I eat for breakfast, and whether or not I get my hair done is all irrelevant.' He had heard the theory before, but if enough people felt as she did, he would have been out of a job, so it wasn't a philosophy he loved.

'You went to Harvard, right?' He was just checking, but remembered that about her. He had always been intrigued by her, and how quiet she was. The public knew a lot more about Marshall Weston, particularly now. He made a lot more noise, as most of the male CEOs did.

'Yes, I did,' she confirmed, 'but there are a lot of other good schools in the country, and business schools, that turn out fine young people who wind up in important jobs and have great careers.' Like her own daughter at Stanford, and several of her friends. But she didn't say that to him. It was more personal information than she wanted to share.

'You don't give away anything about yourself, do you?' he complained. 'That's why I want to interview you. People deserve to know more about you, especially

your stockholders. You're a hero in the business world, and you refuse to act like one. That's because you're a woman. If you were a man, you'd be blowing your own horn, and out chasing bimbos,' he added. 'And you'd make a lot more noise.'

'That's one of my sister's theories too. You two really should get together. You have a lot in common.'

'We'd probably bore each other to death, or argue about who thought of what first. Similarities don't usually attract.'

'I wasn't suggesting you go out with her.' She thought it was a good idea, but she wouldn't admit it to him. 'Just talk.'

'I'll call you for her number sometime. Now I'm going to go to the sleazy bar across the street from my office and cry in my beer, because you told me absolutely nothing I can use about Marshall Weston for the article I'm working on, with a deadline, I might add. And you won't give me an interview. You win. I must be losing my touch.' He wasn't, but she was relentlessly discreet, which was what he had suspected about her too. But she was also pleasant to talk to, which had surprised him, and she sounded like a real human being. Just one who didn't talk to the press, or divulge anything private about herself. And he admired that about her. Some of his male interview subjects had such big egos, he could barely fit them on the page. She was the opposite of that, although he

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was sure she had one too. She was just a hell of a lot more modest.

‘Thank you for calling,’ she said sincerely. ‘It was nice talking to you.’ She dismissed him politely. And after they hung up, Smith looked up Jillian Hamilton on the Internet. He was curious about her sister too, and wondered if he had read anything she’d written. Her credentials were impressive, the list of books and articles she’d written was long. He figured out that she was about ten years older than he was – he had just turned forty-five. From a photograph he could see that she was an attractive woman, but looked about ten feet tall. Clearly not a date, but possibly an interesting source, and he jotted down her name. But he wanted to interview Fiona, not her sister, and he had no idea how to convince her that she should agree to it. He decided to try again in a few weeks. Meanwhile he had to dig up whatever he could on Marshall Weston, and whoever was willing to comment on him. But he would have loved to have Fiona’s female point of view, and clearly that wasn’t going to happen. He just hoped he could talk her into an interview one day. He was sure that he’d enjoy it, and he’d been honest with her, and not pandering, when he told her he was a fan.

After Fiona and Jillian played tennis, they went out for coffee and Jillian brought up Marshall Weston as an

example of her theories. She had followed him in the news, and had seen his press conference, with Liz standing at his side.

‘He looked guilty as hell to me,’ Jillian commented over cappuccino.

‘What makes you think that?’ Fiona was intrigued. ‘He looked innocent to me. Shows what I know.’

‘He looked much too virtuous, and his apology to everyone and gratitude for the woman’s retraction made me retch. And the business of holding his wife’s hand spells guilty to me. He probably cheats on her all the time and she doesn’t know it. That’s usually how it works.’

‘What made you so cynical?’ Fiona asked her, startled by her refusal to believe Marshall Weston innocent. She sounded almost bitter about it, but Fiona knew she wasn’t, and her experiences with men had almost always been pleasant.

‘I have a lot of male patients who are the CEOs of companies. They all cheat, and tell me about it. It really makes you realize how badly behaved most of those guys are, and emotionally dishonest. I’d never date one of them after what I hear every day. Marshall looks like one of the boys to me.’

‘He seemed like a nice guy when I met him. And Alyssa is crazy about his son. She says they’re a nice family.’

‘That’s what it looks like. Then women come out of



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the woodwork like this one, and the next thing you know, they're at the center of a sex scandal, and their wives are in shock, and everybody's crying. I have a couple of them who even have second families they keep hidden. Their wives help them in their careers, but they're in love with the other woman who is usually younger and better-looking, while the real wife is dedicated to them. And one day they all find out about each other, and the guy finds himself in a huge mess and is stunned that his original wife and kids are pissed off at him and think he's a dishonest prick, which of course he is. They're too chicken to get divorced, and too self-serving, so they want to have their cake and eat it too.'

'That must get pretty dicey.' Fiona was impressed. It would never have occurred to her to do that, or cheat on David while they were married. She never had, although they'd been unhappy for years, and she didn't think David had cheated on her either. But with what Jillian was saying, she wondered. Maybe he had seen women on the side who had been less threatening to him, and less busy than Fiona. But if he had fooled around on her, at least he'd been discreet.

'It definitely gets dicey,' Jillian said with a grin. 'I think they get off on it, having a secret, a double life, two women who serve different purposes for them, one for sex, and the other for business. It's all about them and their needs.'

‘Why do you suppose the second woman puts up with it? I’m assuming she knows the guy is married, even if the real wife doesn’t know about the other woman.’

‘Most of the time the second woman loves him. And it’s all about the power thing again. The excitement of having a man in your life who runs the world. Most women find that exciting. I sure as hell don’t,’ Jillian commented. ‘I’d rather have a guy who’s smaller scale and more human. But powerful men are exciting to a lot of women.’

‘How’s your book coming?’ Fiona asked her then.

‘It’s coming. Slowly but surely. I use a lot of my patients for research to support my theories.’

‘By the way, I talked to a guy this week who thinks like you do on this subject. He called me to comment on Marshall Weston’s sexual harassment accusation, and I refused to. We got on the subject and I told him about you and your book. He’s an investigative reporter, specializing in business, and he’s come to a lot of the same conclusions you have about powerful men, and the difference between how men and women react to power, and how others view them. Smart guy, maybe you’d like him.’

‘What does he look like?’ Jillian sounded intrigued.

‘I don’t know. I talked to him on the phone and I’ve read some of his pieces. He writes well, and his articles are good. His name is Logan Smith. He sounds young

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though.’ That had never stopped Jillian before, but he had sounded even younger than he was when Fiona spoke to him.

‘I’ve read him before too,’ Jillian said, and knew instantly who he was. ‘He won a Pulitzer for a series of interviews he did with Nelson Mandela. Fantastic stuff. I think he went to Harvard too.’ He hadn’t said so to Fiona. He had told her very little about himself, in fact nothing, and was more interested in her, and writing an article about her.

‘He wanted to do an article about me. I turned it down. I hate that stuff.’ Jillian knew she did, but thought she had missed an opportunity to meet an interesting person.

‘You should meet him anyway. And I don’t think he’s all that young, from what I remember. He’s somewhere around your age.’

‘He didn’t ask me out on a date.’ Fiona laughed at her sister, who was always willing to meet new men. But Fiona wasn’t, and too busy to date. ‘He just wanted to interview me.’

‘Well, tell him to call me. I’ll check him out for you,’ Jillian teased her.

Then they finished their coffee and talked about their summer plans. Jillian was going to Europe with friends who had rented a house in Tuscany, and she knew Fiona rented the same house in Malibu every year. She and

the children loved it, and it was so easy to get there. 'You should do something different for a change,' Jillian suggested, but she also knew that her younger sister was a creature of habit, and too busy to plan a real vacation. And the house in Malibu was relaxing for her. It belonged to a Hollywood producer and was a beautiful place. She always wanted Jillian to come down and visit them, but they usually went away at the same time. And both of her kids had their own plans in August. Mark was going to Kenya with his girlfriend, and planning to do volunteer work in a village that needed help laying pipes to bring in water. And Alyssa was still undecided, but John Weston wanted to go somewhere with her.

When she talked to Alyssa that night, she asked her how John was doing after the stressful week his father had had, and if John was very upset about it. The scandal had been quickly averted, but it nonetheless must have been unpleasant to have his father accused of having an affair and cheating on his mother.

'It was rough on him when it first came out. But it was over pretty quickly. He believed his father was innocent right from the beginning. Apparently, his older brother didn't think so, and thinks they just paid the woman off to shut her up.' Fiona didn't say that her sister thought so too. She felt sorry for Marshall's children. It must have been upsetting for all of them, and his wife too, even if it wasn't true. And Jillian hadn't convinced her. Marshall

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had seemed innocent to Fiona. She wasn't as cynical as her sister. And she reminded Alyssa to bring John over soon, and Alyssa promised she would. Fiona was anxious to meet him and hadn't yet. Alyssa said the romance was going well and they were spending a lot of time with each other. And John would be coming to Malibu for a long weekend. Fiona was happy for her.

And for the rest of June, Fiona was busy at work, and trying to get assorted projects done before she took time off, to go to Malibu with her kids. She always had to pay her dues before she went on vacation, and even more so when she returned, but it was worth it to her.

And on the first of July, her bags were packed, and she flew to L.A. to get the house in Malibu ready for everyone. She could hardly wait to spend three whole weeks with them. They were arriving in time for the Fourth of July weekend. Mark's girlfriend couldn't get time off, but Mark and Alyssa would be there, and John Weston was coming the following weekend.

Jillian left for Italy the same day, and promised to return with two hot Italians in tow, one for each of them.

'I don't know what I'd do with that,' Fiona said, laughing when Jillian called to say goodbye from the airport, while she was waiting for her flight.

'You'd figure out something,' Jillian said with a grin. 'Have fun with the kids. I'll call you.'

'I'll miss you,' Fiona said, feeling nostalgic for a

minute. Jillian would always be the big sister who was the only adult family she had now, since their parents had died. She liked knowing that she was somewhere nearby, and they talked to each other often. 'Take care,' Fiona said, feeling like a kid again, and she blew her a kiss as they hung up. Fiona knew they were both going to have fun on vacation, doing what they each enjoyed most. Jillian was going to be meeting lots of new people, visiting old friends in Europe, and having new adventures. And Fiona was going to be with her kids, swimming in the ocean, and lying on the beach. It sounded like sheer heaven to her. And she was in great spirits and full of anticipation when she flew to L.A. that night.

## Chapter 10

Both of Fiona's children arrived in Malibu on the same day, two days after she'd gotten to the house, and checked that everything was in good order for them. She had bought groceries and magazines and put fresh flowers around the house, and everything seemed to be working. They had been renting the same house for seven years, so it was familiar to all of them, and a little bit like coming home. Three weeks in Malibu always felt like real summer to them, no matter what they did later. And for Fiona, this was the best part, and the only vacation she took, except for a week at Christmas, when she went skiing with her kids the day after Christmas. She couldn't imagine spending vacations without them. Her sister's plans were always much more glamorous, but this was fun for her.

Mark arrived from New York by lunchtime, and Fiona was thrilled to see him. He hadn't been home since his

spring break in March, and he looked thin and pale, like a real New Yorker, but he was happy and healthy. He was excited about his upcoming trip to Kenya, and told Fiona all about it, while they ate lunch on the deck, and waited for Alyssa to arrive. She arrived two hours later, with a suitcase full of bikinis and cut-off jeans. And whatever else she needed, she planned to borrow from her mother. Fiona lost half her wardrobe to her, with great frequency, except the clothes she wore to work, which Alyssa hated. She always told her mother she should dress 'cuter' for work, which Fiona just laughed at. She didn't think 'cute' was the right look for a CEO. She couldn't see herself arguing with Harding Williams at a board meeting in a miniskirt, although it certainly would have confirmed his opinion of her.

Fiona still hadn't had any definite conclusions from the investigative service about the boardroom leak. And finding the source was proving to be more difficult than they'd expected. But they were promising her definitive answers soon. And for the time in Malibu, she wasn't going to think about it. This was her time with her children, and it was sacred to her. And she was very grateful that at their ages they were still willing to spend time with her.

'So what do you two want to do for dinner tonight?' Fiona asked them, as they lay on the deck at the end of the afternoon. The three of them had gone swimming in



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the ocean, and taken a long walk on the beach. And Mark had used the surfboard that he borrowed there every year. He was a tall, handsome, dark-haired boy, who was a better-looking version of his father at the same age. The only thing he had inherited from his mother was her green eyes. And Alyssa was the image of her mother. 'Do you want to go out, or should we cook dinner here?'

'Let's barbecue,' Mark suggested, and offered to do chicken and vegetables, which sounded good to both women. And Alyssa offered to make the salad. They ate simple, healthy food, and none of them were enormous eaters. What they cared about most was being together. And what Fiona loved about their vacations was that she knew she would wake up every morning to the sounds of her children, and be with them all day. It was a real treat for her, and leaving them at the end of the vacation was always wrenching. But they had plenty of time ahead of them, and after dinner on the deck that night, they watched a movie on the enormous wide-screen TV. The house had its own screening room, with big comfortable leather chairs. There was also an indoor pool in a separate building that they seldom used. They preferred swimming in the ocean and walking on the beach.

They were easy days and quiet evenings, and they had been there for a week when Logan Smith called Fiona on her cell phone, and she was startled to hear him, and wondered how he had gotten her number. She hadn't

given it to him, and the last time he had called her at her office. His calling her while she was on vacation felt like an intrusion.

‘Is something wrong?’ she asked him, wondering if he had some hot tip about NTA, possibly about the board-room leak before she heard it herself. She was instantly wary, and worried the moment he said his name. She hadn’t recognized his voice.

‘No,’ he said casually. ‘I told you I’d call you again sometime. I just wanted to see if I could talk you into that interview I asked you about the last time we talked.’

‘That’s why you called me?’ She sounded shocked, and neither welcoming nor happy about it, although she had been pleasant to him the time before, but this was different. She was not at work.

‘Yes. Why? Is this a bad time?’ He sounded suddenly embarrassed at the tone of her voice. She was obviously annoyed that he had called her.

‘I’m on vacation with my kids, and I’m not working. And I told you I don’t want to do an interview. Now or later. I don’t do interviews. And I don’t talk business when I’m away with my kids.’ And from Fiona’s standpoint, she didn’t want to be a CEO when she was on vacation with them, just their mother.

‘I’m sorry. I really am. I wouldn’t like that either,’ he admitted. ‘I hope you’re at least in the same time zone, so I didn’t wake you up or something.’ He suddenly

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wondered if she was someplace exotic like Tahiti, Europe, or New Zealand. She could have been anywhere.

‘No, it’s fine,’ she said tersely. And then she thought of something. ‘How did you get this number?’

‘Your office gave it to me.’ He was apologetic, and she made him feel as though he had committed a crime, calling her while she was on vacation with her children.

‘My assistant is on vacation. The temp must have given it to you. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude. But I like focusing on my kids when I’m with them. My office knows not to call me unless something dire happens.’ She sounded slightly mellower as she explained it to him, but not much. ‘I’ll be back in two weeks. You can call me then, but I’m not going to give you an interview,’ she reiterated, and he was beginning to believe her. She sounded definite about it, which blew all his hopes for a story about her. He was counting on her feeling differently about it when he called her again, and that was obviously not the case, and she made it clear to him. And in a way, he admired her for it, her total lack of interest in being in the limelight. She apparently had strong family values as well. She seemed like a nice person, and not what anyone would have expected of a woman in her position. It confirmed everything he thought about the difference between men and women in jobs like hers. Most men wouldn’t have been annoyed if he called while they were with their kids. Fiona

was serious about both her jobs, as mother and CEO.

‘Look, maybe you’ll let me take you to lunch when you get back, so I can apologize for intruding on you, and prove that I’m not as rude as you seem to think.’

‘I don’t think you’re rude, just pushy,’ she said, laughing and being honest with him. ‘You’re hot after a story you’re never going to get from me. I don’t do PR for the company. I’m the CEO. I run the business, that’s enough.’

‘That’s what makes you so interesting, Fiona. All the male CEOs I meet are press whores. You aren’t. And they bore me to extinction. They’re dying to have me write about them. You won’t give me a five-minute interview, and I won a Pulitzer, for chrissake. I’m good,’ he said, almost pleading with her, and she laughed again.

‘I know you are. I’ve read your pieces, and my sister said so. She loved your series on Mandela. I just don’t want to be in the press. I don’t need it, I don’t want it, and I don’t like it. I’m not a movie star. I run a company. It’s not sexy to read about, and how I do it is no one’s business. And as long as my stockholders are happy, that’s all I need. The general public doesn’t need to know me. And I like being anonymous, and leading a quiet life with my kids, so you’re barking up the wrong tree on that one. And I’m no use to you as a source because I don’t tell secrets, so you won’t get anywhere with me.’ It was as clear as she could be.

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'I get it. I'm sorry. Really.' He sounded both discouraged and embarrassed. 'I'll call you for lunch sometime, although you'll probably tell me you don't eat lunch and don't have time.'

'Actually, that's true.'

'Have a great vacation,' he said, and meant it, and hung up a minute later, and Fiona called the temp in her office and told her not to give out her cell number again, and the girl said she wouldn't, and apologized for having given it to Logan.

After that Fiona forgot about him, and concentrated on her kids. They were thoroughly enjoying the house in Malibu, and Alyssa was ecstatic when John came down and stayed with them for four days, and Fiona was pleased to discover that she really liked him. He was bright, kind, polite, and wonderful to Alyssa, and he and Mark got along like two brothers, and even went fishing together. Mark was two years older than John, but John was mature for his age, and he was a wonderful addition to the group. And Fiona had never seen her daughter as happy. She got a chance to talk to her about it when the two boys were out surfing together.

'It's looking pretty serious between you two,' Fiona commented. She had no objection to it, but they were both young, and she didn't want Alyssa thinking about marriage yet. She said they weren't, but she readily admitted that they were in love with each other, and

Fiona was letting them share a room. He was a truly great kid, with all the right values. And he had a profound respect for both his parents, which Fiona was pleased to hear.

‘We’re just having fun, Mom,’ Alyssa said, looking relaxed. ‘I don’t want to get married for another ten years, if then. And I still want to go to business school, and I want to work for a few years before I do. Johnny’s going to apply to Harvard too. It would be cool if we both get in, or maybe Stanford, but that’s a long way off. We’re not making any plans for the future, we’re just enjoying what we’re doing now.’

‘That’s the way it should be, sweetheart,’ Fiona said, and leaned over to hug her daughter. It was so nice being able to do that and be together every day. ‘I really like him.’

‘He wants you to meet his parents. Maybe we could all have dinner together sometime in September. They’re in Tahoe for the summer. Or at least his mom is, his dad is working and commutes on weekends. It sounds like his dad works as hard as you do.’ Fiona wasn’t surprised to hear it. ‘His mom went to law school, and has a law degree, but she never practiced. She’s a stay-at-home mom, which seems kind of too bad to me,’ Alyssa said, unable to understand a whole other generation of women who had gotten educations, and then married and never worked. ‘She helps his dad entertain clients. And took

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care of the kids. It sounds really boring,' Alyssa said, and Fiona laughed.

'That's what corporate wives do, or used to. Nowadays most women work. Maybe she'll do something when John's younger sister goes to college.'

'She does volunteer work, at a homeless shelter.' It sounded noble to her, but Alyssa much preferred a life like her mother's, where she was working at her own career. It was exactly what Alyssa wanted to do when she finished school. And her mother had demonstrated to her that you could have kids and work, and even have an important career. And John had said he would prefer that too. She had talked about her parents' divorce with him, and how angry her father had been about her mother's career. She never wanted to be in a situation like that, and she knew her father's resentment of it had destroyed her parents' marriage. Her father and his mother were throwbacks to another time. And Alyssa was a modern young woman who wanted a big career like her mom's. And John was a modern young man, who expected his wife to work, and would be proud of her, if the relationship lasted and they got that far. And they secretly both hoped it would, but it was much too soon to tell.

Fiona liked everything she heard from her, and what she had seen of John in the past four days. And she was looking forward to meeting the Westons in the fall and getting to know them. She and Marshall would have

much in common, although women like Liz Weston were less her style. Hers was a life that Fiona would have hated, but she liked their son a lot, which said a great deal about them, and both his parents were part of that equation, not just one.

On the last night of John's stay they went to an Italian restaurant in Malibu, and the four of them had a great time together, laughing and talking. John felt like one of the family, and Fiona said at dinner that she was going to miss him, and he said he hated to leave too. They had decided that Alyssa was going to visit him in Tahoe, after Malibu. And John invited Mark to come up for a weekend before he left for Kenya, and he was looking forward to it too.

John was teasing Alyssa about her pathetic fishing skills and disgust over taking the fish off the hook when two women walked into the restaurant and sat down at the table next to them. They had two little girls with them, and Fiona noticed immediately that they were identical twins. Alyssa glanced at them and smiled, and Fiona commented on what beautiful children they were, but so was their mother. She was a spectacular-looking young woman with a halo of soft blond hair, and the twins looked just like her. And the woman with them appeared to be a friend. The twins smiled shyly at Alyssa after she smiled at them, and their mother glanced over at the group at Fiona's table because they seemed to be having



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so much fun. Fiona noticed that the young woman's eyes were sad as she gazed at them. There was something wistful about her, as though she were unhappy about something, and she was very sweet to her children. John glanced over and smiled at the little girls too, and then went back to teasing Alyssa, until she couldn't take it anymore and threatened to throw food at him if he didn't stop.

'John Weston! You stop that right now, or I'm not coming to Lake Tahoe!' she threatened him, and he leaned over and kissed her and said he was only kidding. But as soon as Alyssa said his name, loud enough for the next table to hear her, Fiona saw the young blond woman's head turn instantly, and she stared at John intensely, as though studying everything about him. She was mesmerized by him. No one else at the table had noticed. The young people were all bantering with each other and talking about fishing, but Fiona saw the woman's eyes, and something about her wrenched at Fiona's heart. For the next hour, the woman stared at John and no one else, examining his every move and gesture, as though she were looking for someone she had lost. Fiona saw her whisper something to her friend, who then stared at John too. The two women couldn't keep their eyes away. And when Fiona's group left, the two women watched John until he left the restaurant. He never noticed, and Fiona didn't say anything. And once

they were gone, Ashley looked at Bonnie with a devastated expression. Her own daughters' half-brother had been only inches from them, and never knew who they were.

She had recognized Marshall's son instantly the moment she heard his name. He looked just like his father, and like he was having a great time, and he had smiled several times at her girls, who had been fascinated by the group at the next table and all the fun they were having. But it pained Ashley yet again to realize that she and her daughters didn't exist in Marshall's world. No one knew about them and maybe never would. Kezia and Kendall had two half-brothers and a half-sister they knew nothing about, and who knew nothing about them. They existed in another world, hidden by their father, and yet their paths had crossed that night anyway, by sheer chance.

Ashley was in tears when she dared to call Marshall that night and told him about it. He was on his way home from Tahoe, where he had spent the weekend with Liz and Lindsay and their friends. Ashley told him what a handsome boy John was, and how much he looked like him, and Marshall was shocked and frightened. Ashley seemed obsessed with him.

'Did you say anything to him?'

'No, I didn't. I couldn't,' Ashley said sadly, and Marshall was relieved. 'He and the girls are brother

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and sisters, and he has no idea they exist. That's not right,' she said, sounding unhappy, but there was nothing he could do about it, and she knew that. He was just glad she hadn't lost her cool and said something to him, or introduced herself.

'One day they'll all meet,' Marshall said to her, and for a long moment Ashley didn't answer. His double life was getting to her, and had been more acutely since the threatened sexual harassment suit. Ever since she'd learned that he had cheated on her, things were different – even if it had been a one-night stand, which she didn't believe. He had lied to Liz for eight years, and maybe now he was doing the same to her. 'This isn't easy for me either,' he reminded her, as though to elicit sympathy from her, but it didn't. He had the option to do it differently, but until now had chosen not to. He was still lying to Liz and keeping her and the twins in the closet. And now she had been inches away from one of his children, and they had passed like ships in the night, as though she and the girls didn't matter at all. And when they hung up, Ashley cried herself to sleep that night, realizing it might never be any different. She was beginning to lose hope that their situation would ever change.

## Chapter 11

When Fiona went back to work, she was swamped, as she always was, for the first few days. But it was totally worth it, she had had a ball with her kids. And when they got back, Alyssa went up to Tahoe to visit John, and Mark went with her for a few days and then flew back to New York to meet up with his girlfriend and leave for Kenya. Fiona was working ten-hour days in the office, and several more hours at home every night, trying to catch up.

She was just beginning to get a grip on it when Logan Smith called her, this time in the office. He wouldn't have dared to use her cell phone again, although he had kept the number. She was about to tell her secretary to take a message when he called, and then decided to pick it up. She didn't want to add another call to return on her list, and she was aware that she had been curt with him the time before. She had been trying to return calls all week,

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and answer e-mails, along with everything else. There were problems in several plants, documents she had to sign, letters to answer, reports to read and analyze and respond to, and meetings she had to attend. When she took Logan's call, she was so busy she sounded vague.

'Yes?' For a minute, she'd forgotten who was calling as she looked for something in a stack of papers on her desk.

'Fiona? It's Logan. Logan Smith.' How many people did he think she knew named Logan? she wondered.

'Yes, sorry. How are you?' She sounded as though she were going in ten directions and trying to be polite.

'I'm fine. How was your vacation?'

'Terrific,' she said with a smile. 'I hate it when my kids leave again. I love waking up in the same house with them every morning. It's miserable after they're gone, but I've been so busy since I got back I hardly have time to notice.' She sounded warmer as soon as she mentioned her children. And he realized it was the way in with her. 'So what can I do for you?' she asked, putting on her business voice again. 'Not an interview, I hope.' He could tell she meant it.

'I know you're busy, but I was wondering if you'd like to have lunch. I enjoyed talking to you when I called about Marshall Weston, and instead of harassing you for an interview, or disturbing you on vacation, I was hoping we could have lunch.' He sounded a little nervous, and Fiona was confused.

‘As a basis for an interview?’ She was faintly suspicious, and she rarely stopped for lunch.

‘No, just lunch. You can tell me about your sister’s book.’ He had remembered what she said.

‘I don’t usually eat lunch.’ But she didn’t want to be rude again. He had been nice every time he called, and she had enjoyed talking to him too. And she could hear her sister’s voice in her head, telling her to go. It wasn’t a date. Just a smart guy who might be nice to talk to over lunch. ‘Okay,’ she said, sounding hesitant. ‘Sure. Why not? As long as you promise not to print anything I say.’

‘I promise. And I won’t ask you for any trade secrets, or about the sexual habits of the male CEOs you know. That leaves weather and sports.’ She laughed at what he said.

‘That could be a problem, I know nothing about sports.’

‘Okay. We can stick to weather. It looks like it might rain today.’

And then she wondered if he would mind coming to Palo Alto to lunch. ‘I don’t have time to come into the city,’ she said apologetically.

‘I didn’t think you did. I actually have an appointment out there this afternoon. Would today work for you?’

She thought about it for a minute and decided that it would. She didn’t really have time, but as buried as she

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was, an hour off wouldn't make that much difference, as long as they were quick.

'I can get out of here for about an hour,' she said, sounding slightly panicked, as she glanced at the stacks of files and folders piled up on her desk. She tried not to think about it and focused on lunch.

'That'll do.' He could easily imagine how busy she was, and was happy she was willing to see him at all. He named a simple restaurant she liked where they could get a salad or a sandwich and eat outside, and she agreed to meet him there at one. He told her he was wearing a blue shirt, tweed jacket, and jeans. And he knew what she looked like.

She didn't have time to think about it. As she was driving to the restaurant, she realized that it was the first lunch break she'd taken, that wasn't for a meeting, in many months. She parked her car outside the restaurant and went in. She found Logan sitting at a table in the garden, reading e-mails on his phone. He looked up as soon as she approached the table and stood up. She was wearing one of her business suits, this one with a skirt, and had left her jacket in the car. She had on high heels, and a simple white silk blouse, and her hair in a bun. She looked very serious and businesslike in her work clothes, what she referred to as her 'uniform,' and she was surprised to see how attractive he was. He had dark hair with gray at the temples, and as Jillian had remembered,

he was close to her age. And as she sat down at the table, she decided that he looked the way a journalist should look. Slightly intellectual, but interested and alert. He had lively brown eyes and a ready smile, and he looked very pleased to see her when she sat down. She was five minutes late.

‘Sorry I’m late. I can never get out of my office without someone calling me right as I’m going through the door.’ She put her cell phone on vibrate as she said it, so they wouldn’t be disturbed during lunch. And then she looked at him politely. ‘Thank you for inviting me to lunch.’ It was a first for her, without clients or associates.

‘I felt like I owed you an apology, for calling you when you were on vacation and disturbing you with your kids.’

‘You couldn’t know,’ she said pleasantly, and started to unwind. She had forgotten till then how good it felt to get out of the office in the middle of the day. ‘I try not to let my work interfere with my home life. When I’m with them, I belong to them. That’s always been my rule.’

‘Your children are lucky. Both my parents were physicians, and I don’t think I ever had a conversation with them, without one of them answering the phone or flying out the door. My father was an orthopedic surgeon, and my mother was a pediatrician, and still is. In a small town in Vermont. She’s seventy-one years old, still practicing and going strong.’ It sounded good to Fiona, and an interesting way to grow up.



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‘How did you wind up here?’

‘Like most people who come to the West Coast, by accident. I came out for a summer, fell in love with it, and stayed. But I travel a lot. Mostly to L.A. and New York. But I get a lot of work done here. I enjoy what I do.’ He was easy to talk to, and they only stopped long enough to order lunch. Caesar salad for both.

‘So do I,’ Fiona said, about enjoying her work. ‘I always did, although I felt guilty about it when my kids were small. I stayed home for three years with my son, and I knew I couldn’t do that anymore. I need to work. But I managed to be with them a lot too. It was a juggling act, but it worked. I was committed to the idea of having both, a family and a career. I still believe that, but it’s not always as easy as it sounds.’ In fact, to him it sounded damn hard, with a career like hers, and he knew she had had big jobs for a long time. She’d been a major player in the business community for nearly twenty years, and by his standards she was still young. He didn’t consider forty-nine old. He was four years younger.

‘Did your husband help with the kids?’ He was curious how marriages among the powerful worked, as a point of human interest, not just for his book.

She laughed before she answered his question. ‘No. He thought that was my job. So I did both. A lot of women do. But he was never happy about my career. He wanted me to help him with his family business, but I thought that would

be a mistake, and an invitation to arguments and a bad situation. So I took jobs with other companies, and we fought about that instead. He really wanted a stay-at-home wife, and got it right on the second round.'

'And you? No second round?' He was intrigued by her, and wanted to hear everything she was willing to say. He liked people and was always fascinated by them. She had been very open so far. And her divorce from David Carson was not a secret. It was even listed on the Internet, in her bio. It didn't mention the cause of their divorce, but she had told Logan the way it was.

'No time,' she said in answer to his question, and she smiled again. 'We've been divorced for six years. I've been busy with my work and kids. It doesn't leave me much time for anything else.' And she didn't look deprived. She looked like a happy woman, who was doing what she wanted with her life. He liked that about her, and he was surprised by how attractive she was. She was prettier than her pictures. And her hairdo, with her hair pulled back in a bun, and her simple white silk blouse and straight navy skirt reminded him of what corporate women were supposed to look like. He couldn't help wondering what she would look like with her hair down, in more casual clothes. But she could hardly go to work in a T-shirt and jeans.

'How old are your kids?' he asked, and she smiled at the question.

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‘My gut response is always two and five. Unfortunately, they’re nineteen and twenty-two. My son is getting a master’s in social work at Columbia, my daughter will be a junior at Stanford this fall. She’s a business freak like me and wants to get an MBA. My son is the family saint. He’s off to Kenya with his girlfriend this week to help lay pipes to bring water into a village.’

‘They sound like interesting kids,’ he said admiringly.

‘They are, and nice people,’ she said proudly. ‘Do you have any?’

‘Not that I know of. I’ve been divorced for twenty years.’

‘That’s too bad,’ she said sympathetically, and then realized that not everyone felt about children as she did. Like Jillian, for instance, who was happy to have none at all.

‘Yeah, I suppose it is,’ he said, sounding vague. He hadn’t thought about having kids for years, and had decided long ago they weren’t for him. It had actually broken up his marriage. His ex-wife had married someone else and had six. He was happy for her. ‘I’m not sure it even counts by now, it was so long ago. And I was only married for two years, fresh out of college. I married a gorgeous girl from Salt Lake, and after we got married, she told me she wanted to move back, have a million babies, and I was supposed to work for her father, in his printing plant. I tried it for a while, and I figured I would

kill myself if I stayed another six months, so I ran. I came to San Francisco then, and I've been here ever since. I wanted to be kind of a journalist at large, freelancing from all over the world, or a sportswriter, and I wound up covering some interesting stories in Silicon Valley, and got pegged as an investigative reporter on business issues. I wound up discovering some criminal activities that fascinated me, and I got hooked. Maybe I'm a detective at heart and I'm good at that stuff. But I love the real human stories, like Mandela. Interviewing him was the high point of my life. Opportunities like that don't come up very often.'

'My sister read those interviews and said they're fabulous.'

Their salads arrived then, and they continued talking while they ate. They covered a variety of subjects, and he almost asked her about their boardroom leak and decided against it. He didn't want her to think that he'd had lunch with her to pump her for information, which he hadn't. He had taken her to lunch only because he admired what he knew of her, and wanted to get to know her better. He was fascinated by her, and how normal and modest she was, despite her very important job. Nothing about her suggested that she was one of the most important women in the country, running a mammoth corporation, and she was easy and unpretentious on top of it, and incredibly bright. But he liked how unassuming she was,

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and she made him laugh when she talked about her sister, who sounded like a character to him.

‘I think you’d like her,’ Fiona assured him, and having gotten a good look at him now, she was sure that Jillian would be crazy about him. He was not only very smart and well educated, he was also very good-looking, in a casual, easygoing way. ‘She’s in Tuscany right now. She’s a hell of a tennis player, if you like to play.’

‘Are you pimping for her?’ he asked with a grin.

‘She doesn’t need my help.’ Fiona laughed at his question. ‘My sister always has a guy, when she wants one. She looked like a beanpole as a kid, she’s just over six feet tall. And tall or short, young or old, guys drop at her feet. She has such a great personality, I’ve never met anyone who didn’t like her.’ Even David, with all his complaints about Fiona, had thought Jillian was fun. And she always made him laugh.

‘What about you? What were you like as a kid?’ he asked her, and looked genuinely interested. He was asking her questions he normally wouldn’t have asked at a first lunch, and she would have deflected them, but he was open with her, and she was so much more personable and warm than he’d expected, that they were surprisingly forthcoming with each other.

‘I was shy. And I wore glasses and had buckteeth until I had braces,’ she said with a modest smile.

‘And then you turned into a swan,’ he said, looking at her, and she blushed at what he said.

‘Not exactly. I wear contacts, and a night guard at night when I’m stressed, so I don’t clench my jaw.’

‘Scary,’ he said, and they both laughed. ‘With all the stress you must have in your job, I’m surprised you don’t wear a helmet and shin guards, and a protector for your teeth. I don’t know how you do it. The responsibility for a hundred thousand employees would kill me. All I have to do is turn in my stories on deadline.’

‘That’s stressful too,’ she said practically. ‘I don’t know. I like what I do. I think that helps.’ She seemed totally focused on her job, in a very human way. She was completely different from the arrogant CEOs he met and interviewed every day, like the one he was meeting with that afternoon, whom he didn’t like but was an important story. His subjects usually spent hours talking about themselves, telling him how great they were. And Fiona talked about having buckteeth as a kid, and wearing a night guard to bed. It was hardly a sexy image, despite her natural good looks, and she didn’t seem to mind pointing out her own flaws. He thought there was something very touching about it. He found her astonishingly humble, particularly given how important and powerful she was.

‘What’s the one word you would use to describe your job?’ he asked her, trying to get a sense of how she felt

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about it, but he already knew. And she was quick to answer.

*'Hard.* Second word: *fun.* What about you?'

He thought about it for a minute – he wasn't used to anyone asking him the questions. *'Fascinating. Surprising. Different every day. Exciting.* I'm never bored by the people I meet, even if I don't like them. And people never turn out to be what I expected.' She wasn't either. She was even better than he had thought. He was only sorry that she wouldn't let him interview her. He could have done a great piece. But if they wound up friends, by some sheer stroke of good luck, that would be even better. And Fiona was happy she had had lunch with him too. She realized that Jillian was right, and it was interesting to meet new people. And she genuinely liked Logan, more than she thought she would. She had accepted lunch with him to be polite, and she was having a terrific time. She looked regretful when she finally glanced at her watch, saw that it was almost two o'clock, and knew that she had to go. She had a meeting in twenty minutes.

Logan paid for their lunch, and they walked out of the restaurant together.

'Thank you for meeting me for lunch today,' he said sincerely as he walked her to her car. 'It's nice to meet the woman who goes with the voice. You're nothing like I expected. Well, a little, but not a lot. You're just a regular person.' He loved that about her.

‘Yes, I am,’ she said simply. ‘Most people expect the Wizard of Oz, or the Wicked Witch of the West.’ She reminded him more of Dorothy than the witch the house had fallen on, although he had met plenty of those too. But not Fiona. She didn’t take herself too seriously, and listened to what other people had to say. She had an innocent quality that he liked about her too, as though she were so clean and straightforward that she expected everybody else to be too, and they both knew they weren’t. But she seemed like the kind of woman who gave people the benefit of the doubt and brought out the best in those around her.

‘I hope your interview goes well this afternoon,’ she said as she unlocked her car and slid behind the wheel.

‘You don’t use a driver?’ He looked surprised, and she shook her head.

‘I’d rather drive myself. It’s simpler. I only use one if I go to the airport.’

‘Yeah, me too,’ he said with a grin. ‘Well, take care, and thanks for joining me. Maybe we can do it again sometime. And I’d like to meet your sister.’

‘I’ll e-mail you her number. You should call her.’ But even he wasn’t brave enough to call her out of the blue, and he would have felt foolish calling her, just because Fiona said so. ‘Believe me, she’s not shy. And she’d love to meet you and talk about her book.’

‘I’ll let you make the introductions,’ he said.



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‘Thanks again for lunch,’ she said, and waved as she drove away, and Logan thought about her as he walked to his car, amazed at how easy and fun it had been. She hadn’t disappointed him in any way, and the word that came to mind as he thought about her was *terrific*.

Fiona had had a good time at lunch too. When she got back to her spot in the parking lot and parked her car, she glanced at her BlackBerry and saw that she had a message from the investigation service they had used. She listened to it before she got out of her car. It was from the head of the company, and he said it was urgent.

She called him back as soon as she got to her office, and he told her he wanted to come in and see her that afternoon.

‘That urgent?’ Fiona asked him.

‘I think so.’ They had taken long enough to get back to her on it, and now they were in a hurry. She knew she would be in meetings until six o’clock, and told him it was the best she could do, and he promised to be there then. And when she left her last meeting of the afternoon, he was waiting for her in her office. It had been a long day, and she was tired. And she was still paying her dues after her vacation.

She invited him to sit in a small meeting area with her, and he handed her a thick envelope with the initial results of their investigation in it, and she asked him to

sum it up so she didn't have to read it while he waited.

'You may want to close the door before I do,' he said carefully, and she smiled at the espionage aspect of it. Everyone else had left for the day, including her assistants.

'Do you know who the source of the leak was?' she asked as she followed his advice and closed the door to her office, although she felt silly when she did.

'Yes, I do,' he said seriously. 'I got final confirmation of it yesterday. And I checked it again this morning. Everything in the report has been verified, and we used no wiretaps or illegal sources. It's all been handled just as you requested, legally and cleanly.' She nodded, satisfied by what he was saying.

'Why don't you tell me who it is? I'll read the report in detail tonight at home.' She felt a ripple go down her spine as the head of the investigation looked at her. He was retired FBI, and had been highly recommended.

'Your leak on the board is Harding Williams,' he said simply. Fiona stared at him in disbelief. It wasn't possible. They had to have made a mistake. He was pompous and disagreeable, and he hated her, but he was a man who followed the rules, and his integrity was above question.

'Are you sure?' Her voice was a squeak when she said it. 'The chairman?' she asked, as though she needed to confirm who he was. It just couldn't be true.

'The chairman,' he said with a somber look. 'He's been

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having an affair with a very attractive young woman for the past year. She's a journalist, and it may have started innocently, but she's been bleeding him for information. I don't know if she's blackmailing him or not. I don't think so. But they meet once a week at a hotel, and whatever else they do, he shares information with her. Maybe he just thinks it's pillow talk, but she uses it. And he must have known it since the leak about the Larksberry plant. She actually told one of my operatives that she has a source straight from the boardroom at NTA. She's proud of it. And he's been hinting to his barber that he's having an affair with a much younger woman. She's thirty-two years old and a knockout.' He reached for the envelope, took out a file, and extracted a photograph of a beautiful girl with a stunning figure. She had dark hair and light eyes, and in the photograph, she was exhibiting a fair amount of cleavage. Fiona stared at it for a long time and then handed it back to him, and he put it back in the envelope and sealed it.

'Are you sure he's having an affair with her?' Fiona said in disbelief, and he pointed at the envelope.

'It's all in there. I have photographs of them together, two of them kissing. He seems to be crazy about her.' He was more than twice her age, and all Fiona could think of was the subdued woman he was married to, whom he bragged about being married to for forty-four years. And he had treated Fiona like a slut for twenty-five years, for

a harmless affair she'd had at Harvard in her early twenties. And what Harding was doing was so much worse. He had violated his position of trust as chairman of the board, broken confidentiality, jeopardized their stock, and hurt the company. He had disregarded and disrespected the most important rules of the board, and made a lie of everything he claimed to believe in. He was a hypocrite and a liar, and he was sleeping with a thirty-two-year-old girl, a journalist, and sharing direly sensitive company secrets with her. Fiona felt as though she were ricocheting off the walls and could hardly believe what the investigator had told her. But she knew it had to be true. The investigator had photographs of him going in and out of the hotel to meet her and receipts for the hotel room, and the girl in the picture was the one who had first printed the leak, with her byline. There was no question. Fiona stood up with the envelope in her hand and thanked him. She was going to read it all carefully that night before making a decision, but if what he said was true, there could be only one outcome. Harding Williams would have to be fired from the board and as their chairman. She wanted to read the material, and then she would call an emergency meeting of the board. Even though she didn't like him, and he had tormented her for years, this was not the outcome she had hoped for, nor the one she expected. She would never in a million years have guessed that the leak on the board was Harding.

She left the building with the investigator and drove

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home to Portola Valley. She felt as though someone had shot her out of a cannon. It was all so hard to imagine. She couldn't understand how he could violate the ethics and morality he claimed to believe in and adhere to. It not only proved her sister's theory about men and power, and Logan's thoughts on the subject too, but it reminded her of the old adage, 'There is no fool like an old fool.' And without question, Harding Williams had been a fool. She didn't even have a sense of victory about it, of having discovered the source of the leak; she was just disgusted by it. She had thought he was better than that, but apparently he wasn't. He was as low as you could get, and what he had done was shockingly dishonest.

She didn't even bother to have dinner that night. She sat at her desk reading the report from beginning to end. And when she finished it, she knew what she had to do. She called Harding at home and asked him to meet with her in the morning.

'I have better things to do,' he said irascibly. 'I have appointments tomorrow. I'll come in the day after.'

'I'm sorry, Harding,' she said in an icy tone. 'I need you there tomorrow. Ten A.M.' She had an eight A.M. controller's meeting with the CFO, and expected it to last for two hours.

'What's so important that I need to come in tomorrow?' He didn't even sound worried, just pompous and unpleasant, as usual.

‘I need you to sign off on some reports, and as the chairman of the board, I can only give them to you,’ she said, not wanting him to know the real reason she had asked him to come in. And he grouched about it, but finally agreed.

‘You shouldn’t leave things like that till the last minute,’ he complained, but he could hardly refuse her as the CEO.

‘You’re quite right, Harding,’ she said clearly. ‘See you tomorrow.’ She tried to maintain a neutral tone and barely could.

After that she e-mailed the members of the board and asked them to come in the day after her meeting with Harding. She did not notify Harding of the board meeting, and planned to advise him of it when she met with him in the morning. She wanted an opportunity to speak to him first. But there was very little he could say. They had all the evidence they needed.

She walked around her house after that, thinking about him, and the lies he had told, the fraud he had been, the hypocrite he was. It made her feel sick to think about it. She wasn’t looking forward to the confrontation, but she wasn’t afraid of it either. Dealing with him now was part of her job as CEO. She had a responsibility to the board and the corporation she worked for, and their stockholders. Fiona never lost sight of what she owed them. And she loved the company and wanted to protect it.

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Before she went to bed that night, she sent an e-mail to Logan, to thank him for lunch and tell him that she'd enjoyed it. It felt as though it had been months ago and not that afternoon, so much had happened since. She hit 'send' and sent the e-mail off to him. And then she showered, brushed her teeth, and put her night guard in. And when she looked in the mirror and saw herself, she almost laughed, remembering what Logan had said at lunch when she mentioned it to him. 'Scary.' It was. And so was Harding Williams. Anyone that dishonest, who violated his ethics and responsibilities to the degree that he had, was truly scary. But now, after what she knew, he could no longer torture her. He had no power over her anymore. And she went to bed, and slept like a baby, feeling as though a thousand-pound weight had been lifted off her shoulders. He had condemned her as a young woman, and been rude to her for all the years she'd been at NTA. And now she knew the truth about him. He had abused his power as chairman, cheated on his wife, and lied to them all. But it was over now. The mighty chairman was about to fall.

## Chapter 12

When Harding Williams showed up in Fiona's office the next day, he strode in without waiting for her assistant to announce him. Fiona was seated at her desk, going through some papers, and expecting him. He was twenty minutes late, and she didn't care. She had been thinking about him all morning, and had read the investigator's report again when she got up. She wanted to be sure she hadn't missed anything important, or even a small detail, but she hadn't. It was all there, along with the photographs of him with the young woman, even him kissing her in a dark doorway. It made Fiona feel sick when she saw it, and sorry for his wife of forty-four years.

'Good morning, Harding,' she said quietly, as he stood across her desk from her, glaring at her, annoyed that she had asked him to come in. She got up and closed her office door. 'Please sit down.' She gestured to the chairs



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in the sitting area, where she had met with the investigator the night before.

‘I don’t have time to waste,’ he said brusquely. ‘I have appointments in the city this afternoon. I can’t run down to Palo Alto every five minutes to please you.’

‘That’s fine,’ she said, as they sat down. ‘We can keep this short. I’d like you to resign,’ she said in a clear voice. ‘I think you know why. And I’d like to keep this simple for both of us, and the board.’ He looked stunned, by what she’d said and by how smoothly she’d said it. She didn’t look angry or upset, just businesslike and cold. And she met his gaze without hesitating for an instant. ‘You violated your responsibilities as chairman of the board. You violated the confidentiality agreement you signed, which I’d like to point out to you is a legal document. You jeopardized this company. You gave information to a member of the press, whom you are apparently sleeping with, coincidentally. You’re dishonest and hypocritical, and out of respect you no longer deserve, I’m giving you the opportunity to resign from the board today. And if you choose not to, you will be fired by the board tomorrow. I suggest you cite reasons of ill health. You were due to resign in December anyway, so no one will be surprised. It’s only a matter of a few months’ difference, and ill health is entirely plausible. I’m sure you’ll agree.’ He had opened and closed his mouth several times but said nothing as Fiona went on, and he stared at her in

outrage, and then stood up and paced around the room. He turned to her then with pure venom in his eyes.

‘How dare you speak that way to me?!’ He tried to intimidate her, but it didn’t work. Fiona didn’t look impressed by his posturing, and she spoke in a glacial tone.

‘How dare you violate this board in the way you did, and give highly confidential information to the press, which affected thousands of lives, and could have caused our stock to plummet, just so you could sleep with some girl half your age, and impress her with what you knew. How dare *you!*’ Her eyes bored into his, and this time the power was hers. Truth was a mighty sword.

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he blustered, and without saying another word, she stood up and handed him the photographs of him and the young journalist that were in the folder on her desk. He looked like he was going to have a heart attack when he saw them.

‘Her byline was on the first leak. That’s enough evidence for me, and it will be for the board too. Who you sleep with is none of our business, but when your lovers start publishing confidential information about this company, given to them by you, then it becomes my business, Harding. You’re a danger to this corporation, and the board will undoubtedly agree. We are bound by confidentiality not to disclose our reasons for firing you,

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but if you force my hand, I will. I don't think you'll want speculation on why you were fired all over the newspapers and the Internet. I wouldn't in your shoes.' Her eyes never left his, and they both knew she had the winning hand.

'You little slut,' he said in a voice filled with fury, and he was literally shaking with rage. 'You whore!'

'That would be your girlfriend, not me,' she said coldly. 'And you. I never was. I was an innocent young girl who was taken advantage of by your friend Jed Ivory, and you've held it against me ever since. I never liked you either, but I respected you for your abilities, the integrity I thought you had, and your distinguished career. And it turns out that you're a sham. You're a fraud, while you brag about being married for forty-four years, and make speeches about morality. You have none. I want you off this board as fast as you can sign your name. You're a danger to us all.'

'You had no right to have me followed,' he shouted at her.

'That's not illegal. I assured all of you that no illegal means would be used to conduct the investigation, and they weren't. You're a damn fool to be kissing her in public and making a spectacle of yourself. If she were anyone else, I wouldn't care, although I think it's disgusting of you, and in poor taste. But the woman you're sleeping with is a reporter, you shared boardroom secrets

with her, and she published them. That's where I draw the line.'

'Closing Larksberry would have come out eventually anyway,' he argued with her, but they both knew it would have been presented very differently at the right time. Instead, the information had been used to damage the company, turn the public against them, stir up their employees, and ultimately jeopardize their stock. And Harding knew it too. His reporter friend hadn't used the information well or responsibly, and he was so besotted with her that he had put himself and the company at risk. 'If you leak this to the press, I'll sue,' he said menacingly, but Fiona wasn't frightened.

'This isn't slander, Harding. It's all true. You can't sue for libel against the truth. It's an iron-clad defense. And we won't leak anything to the press if you resign today. You can tender your resignation to the board tomorrow at nine A.M. I called an emergency meeting and I expect you to be there. It's all over after that.' Fiona maintained a level tone, but he had been shouting at her almost since he walked in. 'How you do this is entirely up to you. You can do it cleanly, or make a mess of it. It's your choice. Personally, I'd go quietly, if I were you.'

'Women like you shouldn't be running corporations,' he said viciously. 'You don't know what you're doing.' But the solidity of their stock even in a bad economy said otherwise, and he knew that too.

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'I'm not under discussion here,' Fiona said quietly, and handed him a resignation letter she'd had prepared for him that morning. He took a look at it, crumpled it into a ball, threw it at her feet, and walked out of the room. But she knew he would have to sign one like it the next day, or they would fire him. He was through, finished, over. He had been exposed as the dishonest person he was. She picked up the crumpled resignation letter and threw it in the wastebasket as her assistant came in with a worried look. She had seen Harding leave, and heard him shouting through the closed door.

'Do you need an Advil?' Fiona laughed at what she said. She had never felt better. She was only sorry she had let him torment her for six years, and make her feel guilty twenty-five years before.

'No, Angela, I don't,' Fiona said, and went back to her desk.

She had a full day of meetings after that, and another finance committee meeting that night, but she wasn't even tired when she got home. And she looked fresh and alert the next morning at nine o'clock when she met with the board. They were already assembled when she got there, and they looked concerned and were anxious to know what the emergency meeting was about. And just as she arrived, Harding stormed into the room. His face was red with rage as he sat down and addressed them from the chairman's seat.

‘I want you all to know what kind of person this woman is,’ he bellowed as they looked at him in astonishment. Fiona knew what was coming, but she didn’t care. There were no more battles to be fought with him. He had lost the war, and the board members were about to find that out too. ‘She had an affair with a married professor when she was at Harvard. She seduced him, and lured him away from his wife. She caused him to divorce her. She’s a homewrecker and a slut. She’s an immoral woman and has been all her life.’ The board members stared at him after his outburst. He looked deranged.

Fiona spoke up in a calm voice as they looked at Harding and then at her. ‘The man was separated when I met him. He was a friend of Harding’s. And the professor in question had a habit of sleeping with his students. He divorced his wife to marry another student he got pregnant, which wasn’t me, and broke my heart. I was twenty-four years old, and the girl he got pregnant was twenty-two. He took advantage of both of us, and a lot of other girls like us before and since. That’s not why we’re here today,’ she transitioned smoothly, as several of the board members squirmed in their seats. They didn’t like what Harding had said, or the way he had tried to portray her. They respected Fiona, as a woman and as the CEO. ‘We’re here because our investigators have discovered the source of our leak,’ she said calmly. ‘Unfortunately, Harding is our boardroom leak. He’s

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involved with a journalist, and has been having an affair with her for the past year. She's the woman whose byline was on the story. There is no question of it, and I have a copy of the report for each of you.' There was a stack of them on the conference table, marked confidential, with their names on them. She went on calmly from her seat. 'I urged Harding to resign yesterday, for reasons of ill health, which would cause very little attention in the press, since he's due to resign in five months anyway. He refused. I would like to make the same suggestion today, or we can fire him. I don't care either way.' She turned to Harding then, who was slumped in his chair. He had run out of steam, and every member of the board looked shocked by what they'd just heard. 'Harding, do you have anything to say?' She asked the question without visible emotion and appeared to be in total control. There were whispered murmurs from the board members as they each took a copy of the report, and then he spoke up.

'I'll resign,' he said as he stood up and looked at the faces around the conference table. 'I want your assurance that none of this will be leaked to the press,' he said with a terrified expression. Every board member nodded assent. He didn't deserve the loyalty he hadn't shown himself, but all Fiona wanted was for the matter to die a silent death. Exposing him would only harm NTA, which was her first concern and theirs, but not his, or he would never have done what he did.

'You have our assurance and our word,' one of the board members spoke up. Harding nodded, and looked at Nathan Daniels, the most senior member of the board. He was a bank president, whom they all respected, and had been on the board longer than anyone else.

'I'll send it to you today. For reasons of ill health,' Harding confirmed. And then he walked out without looking at any of them. He offered no apology, and never said goodbye. He didn't look at Fiona either as he left the room, and there was a long moment of silence as they all absorbed what had happened. He was the last person that any of them would have expected to betray them, or to have his head turned around by an affair with a young woman. He had risked his reputation and his honor for her, and she had betrayed him in turn by publishing what he said.

Fiona brought them to order then, and reminded them that they needed to appoint a new chairman before they left the room. NTA could not have a board without a leader at its helm. She suggested Nathan Daniels, who was respected by them all. Fiona's suggestion was adopted by the board and unanimously endorsed.

Twenty minutes later they all left the room with a copy of the report in their hands. They still looked shocked by everything that had occurred and by the proceedings that morning. Fiona went back to her office and asked the PR department to draft a press release, announcing Harding's



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resignation for reasons of ill health, and Nathan Daniels's appointment as chairman of the board. It was a benign announcement, and Nathan's long tenure made him a reasonable choice that would please their stockholders. The release was unlikely to cause comment in any quarter. And by one o'clock Fiona had Harding's resignation in her hands. It was over. The mystery had been solved. And Harding was gone. Fiona had handled it as she did everything else, with competence, dignity, and grace. She wanted to have a sense of victory about it, but she didn't. She felt nothing except relief, as she quietly went back to her duties of the day as CEO. But her mission had been accomplished; the board of the corporation she had been entrusted to run was safe at last.

## Chapter 13

The first call Fiona got the morning after Harding Williams's resignation was from Logan Smith. She took the call and wondered if the timing was coincidental, or if he was going to comment on Harding leaving the board. She didn't have long to wait.

'Was he your leak?' was the first thing he said after hello. He was even smarter than she'd thought, and had figured it out. But she had no intention of telling him the truth. She liked him, but she wasn't about to divulge secrets to him, or anyone else.

'He's been sick,' she answered calmly, as though nothing unusual had occurred. 'He had to retire at the end of the year anyway. We have mandatory retirement, and he's turning seventy in December. It didn't make sense for him to hang on for another five months in bad health.' She spoke in her most professional voice.

'He doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who would

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retire five minutes before he had to, even if he's half dead. I interviewed him two years ago, and he's a tough old bird.'

'We all get old and sick. Even Harding. We were all worried about him. But it was the right thing to do.' That much was true. But Logan was still suspicious. It didn't sound plausible to him.

'I can smell a party line when I hear one, Fiona.' But he didn't insist. And then he thought of something else. 'Did you know when we had lunch the other day? I'm just curious. I won't run it. You can tell me off the record.'

'Actually, I didn't. I only discovered that he was leaving the board later that day.' That was true too, when she met with the investigator in her office and discovered Harding was the source of their leak. But the decision hadn't been Harding's. It had been hers. 'The board met yesterday to accept his resignation. He couldn't carry out his duties any longer.' She was feeding him partial truths, and she didn't like it. She didn't want to lie to Logan, but she couldn't tell him the truth, nor would she. She wanted to get off the subject. But Logan wasn't ready to do that yet.

'It's no secret he disapproved of women in high corporate positions. He told me that himself. And word on the street was always that he particularly hated you.' It was a heavy statement for him to make and expect her to refute. And she was very careful what she answered.

‘He was an outstanding chairman.’ Her voice was smooth as glass.

‘I’m not going to get anything out of you on this, am I?’ he said, sounding frustrated.

‘Are you calling me for a story? Or as a friend?’ She sounded sad as she asked. She didn’t want to be used, by anyone.

‘A little of both,’ he said honestly. ‘You’re the best source I’ve got on this one, and something tells me there’s more to the story. It was very sudden. You don’t have to tell me what happened if you don’t want to, but don’t lie to me at least.’

‘Then don’t ask me questions I can’t answer.’ She sounded tired as she said it. It had been a long few days since she’d had lunch with him.

‘I’m not going to push you on this,’ he said quietly. He respected her integrity, and knew how hard her job was. And she did it well. She wasn’t the kind of woman who would have told him if Harding was the leak, and he knew it. He was wasting his time asking. ‘I was actually calling about something else,’ he said, changing the subject. ‘I have to do another interview in your neck of the woods tomorrow. I was wondering if you’d have dinner with me. I had a good time with you at lunch. I was going to suggest a bar I go to when I’m in Palo Alto. They serve beer and great burgers. Nothing fancy. And I promise I won’t ask you about Harding Williams. You

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have my word. Just two pals for dinner and beer.' She laughed at what he said. She hadn't had an invitation like that in years.

'In that case,' she said, then hesitated for an instant. She'd been about to decline, but it sounded like fun, and she had no plans. And she was lonely at night after the vacation with her kids. 'I'd like that. Can we make it early? I've had a long week.'

'I'll bet you have,' he sounded sympathetic. And he was sure that whatever had caused Harding Williams to resign hadn't been easy for her either. In the end, all the tough decisions rested on her, and were in her hands. 'Actually, so have I. Is six o'clock too early?'

'That would be perfect.' She could get home at a decent hour after dinner. It had been ages since she'd gone out for beer and burgers at a bar with a friend, but he was good to talk to. And she still wanted to get him together with her sister. He was perfect for her, even if he was ten years younger. She had a feeling that neither of them would care about the difference in their age.

He gave her the name and address of the bar, and told her he'd meet her at six o'clock the next day. And Fiona was pleased to see that any mention of Harding's resignation from the board, due to ill health, had been handled by the press in print and on the Internet as a nonevent. There was some mild speculation, but no one could prove the link with their leak two months before.

And they all emphasized that he'd been due to retire in a few months anyway. They were off the hook. She spent the rest of the day in meetings, dealing with the complicated business of running NTA.

And that night when she got home, she swam in the pool, which invigorated and revived her after a long day. And afterward she called Alyssa in Tahoe, where she was staying at the Westons'. Alyssa told her what they'd been doing and after a few minutes they hung up. Fiona was exhausted and wanted to go to bed.

But what Alyssa hadn't told her mother was that the atmosphere at John's parents' summer home was more stressful than she'd expected. They were very pleasant and polite, but there was a palpable tension between his parents that made everyone ill at ease. John admitted to her as they sat on the dock alone at the end of the day that it had been that way since his father was accused of sexual harassment, even though the woman who had done so had admitted that her claims were false. It didn't seem to make a difference, John told her. His parents had been upset anyway, ever since.

'The woman who accused him of it admitted she was lying, and my mom believed he was innocent all along,' John explained to Alyssa, 'but I think it freaked her out that anyone could make a claim like that. She's been really nervous since it happened. And my sister drives him insane. She's always looking for something to fight

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with them about. She told my dad she thinks he was cheating on my mom. And she still doesn't believe he didn't. So my dad is pissed at her, and my parents fight about that too. I guess it'll blow over eventually. But they haven't been the same in two months.' And then he admitted his worst fear to her. 'Most of the time they get along really well. But my dad is under a lot of pressure at work. Your mother must be too. I know it doesn't make sense, but I worry that they'll get divorced. None of my friends' parents are still together. Look at you,' he pointed out. But Alyssa's parents had been divorced since she was thirteen. She was used to it by now, and Alyssa felt sorry for him. John said he couldn't wait to leave and go back to school. It was worse when his older brother was around. Tom and their father fought about everything, and he thought their father was a liar and a jerk, and he had pounced on the sexual harassment issue, and he believed his father was guilty of it too. John said that Tom never cut their father any slack.

'The perfect family, huh?' he said, looking like a little kid, as they sat on the dock and swung their feet in the icy water. Alyssa loved him and wanted to be there for him. He was very sweet to her.

'There are no perfect families,' Alyssa said, leaning against him as he put an arm around her. 'My parents used to fight all the time. My dad hated my mom's work. He thought she should stay home with us. I think that's

why my mom doesn't even date anymore. All she wants now is peace. I worry about her being alone sometimes. It's lonely for her now that we're gone. But I think my father turned her off marriage and men forever. He picked on her about everything. He still does whenever he sees us. He always has something mean to say about her.' Alyssa looked sad when she said it. Her parents' bad relationship had been painful for her all her life.

'Mine don't fight that much. But my mom's been really nervous since the harassment suit. She always wants everything to be perfect for all of us, and especially for him, and sometimes it just isn't. She wanted my dad to take a month off and stay up here with us, and he wouldn't. He's not even taking a vacation this year, just weekends. And he goes to L.A. every week. It's not easy being a CEO. I think I'd rather run my own business than a huge corporation, like your mom and my dad.' He was becoming increasingly aware of the toll it took on everyone, not just his parents, but Alyssa disagreed.

'I'd love it,' she said, smiling at him. 'It's really exciting. My mom loves what she does. I want to run a big corporation someday too.' The apple didn't fall far from the tree. And her mother was her role model for everything in life. She admired what Fiona did.

'Yeah, but if she winds up alone because of it, what good is that? I'd rather have a solid marriage and a house full of kids,' he said with a grin.



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'I'd be happy with two, like my brother and me,' Alyssa said demurely.

'I was thinking more like five or six,' he teased her. 'And imagine if all six of them were like my sister – I'd kill myself. I swear, she must spend all her spare time figuring out ways to piss them off. She told my father she's going to get a tattoo when she turns eighteen.'

'I'll bet he loved that.' Alyssa laughed. She thought Lindsay was funny, although a rebel to the core, but she was just a kid, and would probably outgrow it in a few years.

'My mom said she doesn't really mean it, but watch her get some ugly tattoo on her eighteenth birthday,' John said with a rueful grin. And Lindsay had gotten considerably worse, and ruder to their father since the threatened harassment suit. John had been relieved to get away from all of them and visit the Carsons in Malibu. Alyssa's family seemed like much happier people, and in spite of her job, he thought her mother was more relaxed than his father, and she obviously loved being with her kids. His own mother was more uptight and under pressure to do everything right and be perfect, and she worried about everything, particularly lately. It just wasn't fun at their house anymore, although it was better when his father came up to the lake for the weekend. He had bought them a Jet Ski, which made his mother nervous. She was afraid he'd have an accident on the lake. Once his father

arrived that weekend, Marshall let John take Alyssa out on their boat, and they sped around and went fishing and enjoyed it. But the boat was a source of arguments between his parents too. The end result was that they weren't having much fun, and they'd been much more relaxed in Malibu. And the lake was as cold as the atmosphere in the house at times. That night Alyssa overheard John's parents arguing about letting John take her out in the boat.

'It's too dangerous. There are accidents on the lake every day. People get killed. What if she gets hurt while she's here?' Liz worried about everything these days.

'Oh, for chrissake, Liz. He's perfectly responsible. You can't treat him like a five-year-old. He plays football. That's a lot more dangerous than driving a boat around the lake.'

'That's different.' Liz tried to explain, but Marshall wouldn't listen, and when they went to bed that night, he turned to her and asked her what was wrong. As soon as he said it, she started to cry. She seemed to cry constantly now, and had for the past two months. It was like an aftershock of everything that had happened. She had been so solid and strong when he needed her to be, and now she was falling apart.

'Sweetheart, what is it?' he asked her gently as she clung to him and cried. She hated it when he went anywhere these days.

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'I don't know,' she said honestly. 'I'm scared all the time that something bad will happen, to you, or the boys, or Lindsay.' The accusation of harassment had rocked her world, and even though she believed him, the idea that he might have an affair was haunting her now. She had never believed he cheated on her, but suddenly she was worried that he would. She felt ugly and old. And the malice in the world, embodied by a woman like Megan Wheeler, had come too close to their peaceful life, and it had shaken Liz badly. Nothing felt safe to her anymore. She even worried that something would happen to him in L.A., or that the company jet would crash with him on it. She was suffering from a kind of nonspecific acute malaise.

'Maybe you should see a doctor,' Marshall said, looking worried, and Liz nestled into his arms. He felt that she was upset all the time now, and he was helpless to calm her down. He wondered if she was sick.

'I'll see how I feel when we go home,' she said quietly. He was worried about her, he didn't understand what had happened to her. She had always been his rock, and he could count on her, and suddenly she had gone weak at the knees. It was a relief for him every week when he went back to the city, and got away from her for a few days.

And things in Malibu were no better. Ashley was depressed too. The whole incident with Megan Wheeler had made her realize that Marshall might cheat on her

again, even for a one-night stand. And she had become increasingly obsessed about Liz, ever since she'd seen them together on TV. She was fed up with his double life, between the two households, and she no longer wanted to wait for Lindsay to finish senior year. She wanted him to leave Liz now and move to Malibu to live with her and the girls. She harped on him about it every chance she got.

'I can't wait another year,' she said, sobbing at breakfast, and Marshall felt like a Ping-Pong ball being batted back and forth between two crying women, both of whom were driving him insane. He tried to be patient with Liz, but Ashley was putting so much pressure on him that he expressed his anger more frequently with her, which only made things worse for them.

'I can't live like this!' he shouted at her one morning after the girls left for camp. He tried not to lose his temper around them, but he needed Ashley to be more understanding than she was being at the moment. Marshall pointed out that she was a grown woman, and his situation was not new to her. 'I think Liz is having some sort of nervous breakdown, and I can't deal with you falling apart too.' He ran his hands through his hair in desperation, and Ashley burst into tears and ran upstairs to their bedroom. She was sick and tired of hearing about Liz. He found Ashley sobbing in their bed half an hour later, and he didn't know what to do. Both

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women were driving him crazy. Neither of them felt sure of him anymore, and both of them were insecure. Their peaceful lives had been shattered, and whichever city he was in now, it felt like the wrong one to him. He was going from one unhappy woman to another. And Lindsay only made it worse when he was with Liz. She had barely spoken to her father since May. At least the twins still thought he was a hero, but no one else did. Ashley was accusing him of cheating on her, and Liz was afraid he would. He had no one to talk to about it, and he was barking at everyone wherever he went. He could hardly concentrate on his work, but at least going to the office was a relief.

‘Ashley, you have to calm down,’ Marshall begged her. He wanted things to be better with her again, even more so than with Liz. Liz was his duty. Ashley was his dream. ‘You have to trust me. I swear to you, everything will be fine in a year. You’ll have everything you want. But if I walk out on Liz now, my kids will never forgive me. Just let me get Lindsay through high school, and all your dreams will come true.’ But he knew she no longer believed him, and that everything Bonnie said to her when he wasn’t around just made it worse. They were hardly making love. He could barely think straight anymore. All he wanted was for everything to be the way it had been for the past eight years. Ashley wanted more. She wanted everything, and a full life with him.

When he got back to Lake Tahoe on Friday, Lindsay had had a fight with her mother, and they weren't talking to each other. He poured himself a stiff drink and went out to sit on the dock, and a lone tear slid down his cheek. His life was a mess, and there was nothing he could do about it, and he didn't want to. He didn't want to rock Liz's world any more than it already had been. Megan Wheeler's claims had turned Liz's life upside down, worse after it was resolved than when it was happening, or so it seemed. And his admission of guilt to Ashley, even minimally for the sake of honesty with her, hadn't served him well. He was sorry he had told her what he did. He needed both of them to calm down so they could regain some kind of normalcy. And in a year, when Lindsay graduated, he could see where things were with Liz. But whichever way he turned, he knew he would destroy someone's life, or his own. That was the last thing he wanted. All he needed from both of them was peace, and their support, not their demands. He felt as though he had two boa constrictors around his neck, and they were squeezing him as hard as they could. It even made him nervous now when he went to L.A. Instead of being welcomed with open arms and jumping into bed with him, he had no idea what condition Ashley would be in, what she would accuse him of this time, and her demands had been strident ever since she'd seen him on TV with Liz.

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He sat staring out at the lake, with his drink in his hand, thinking about all of it, wondering what to do. Everything seemed discordant in his life, and all it did was make him want to run away, from both of them. Ashley talked to him about his responsibility to her and the twins, which he knew came straight from Bonnie, who spent more time with her than he did, and had ample opportunity to poison her against him. And Liz was talking about spending more time together and even coming to L.A. with him in the fall if she could find someone to stay with Lindsay, which panicked him. He felt as though his whole world, and the women in it, were closing in on him. As he thought about it, he finished his drink, and dove into the icy water. Feeling his body tingle with the shock of it felt good to him. He swam out to the raft and then back to the dock and got out. And when he got back to the house, Liz and Lindsay were fighting again and both of them were in tears. It was more than he could deal with, and without saying a word to either of them, he walked past them and upstairs to his bedroom. He closed the door, and lay on the bed with his eyes closed, trying not to think about it. And as he lay there, he heard a text message come in. It was from Ashley. She knew she wasn't supposed to do that, but sometimes she did anyway. And lately she had been taking more and more chances, as a way of pushing him. He glanced at the text message and all it said was 'I love you. We miss you.'

Danielle Steel

He erased it and closed his eyes again, and tried to go to sleep. But all he could think of was Ashley and the twins, and how good it felt to be in bed with her. He was going to L.A. on Tuesday, and all he could hope was that this would be a better week. And maybe by the end of summer they would all calm down again and get off his back. All he wanted now was peace.



## Chapter 14

Fiona found the bar easily on Friday at six o'clock. It was exactly as Logan had described: kind of a dive, full of students from Stanford, and a few people who had stopped by after work for happy hour and a beer on the way home. It was dark inside when she walked in, and she saw him at a table in a back corner and smiled to herself. It wasn't the kind of place she went to usually, but it made her feel young and carefree, and not like a responsible CEO. She was wearing the trousers of her pantsuit, and had rolled up the sleeves of her silk shirt. And she had changed into flat shoes she had in her trunk, and just so as not to look like someone's mother among all the students, she let her hair out of the severe bun she normally wore to work, and her blond hair was cascading loosely to her shoulders. It was the best she could do to look more casual, given what she wore to work, and it felt better as she walked over to the table and Logan looked up from his newspaper with a grin.

'You found it.' He looked happy to see her, and he was wearing a blue shirt and jeans, and his sleeves were rolled up too.

'No problem. How are you?' she asked as she slid into her seat. And although she hadn't planned it, or even been open to it at first, she felt as though they were becoming friends. It was exactly what her sister said she needed in her life, more people, less structure, to balance her enormous responsibilities. And as usual, Jillian was right. Fiona was beginning to like Logan and thought he would be a good friend, if he didn't press her for insider information about NTA, which remained to be seen. He had said he wouldn't, and she was going to hold him to his word, otherwise they couldn't be friends.

'I'm fine. Happy it's Friday,' he said with a grin of relief. 'How was your day?' It was refreshing and new for her to have someone ask. He actually looked interested when he asked her, and she hoped it wasn't a ploy to get her to talk about work, but she decided to be honest with him, as far as she could, like two ordinary friends meeting at a bar. This was new to her. Her social engagements were more formal, either dinner parties with old friends, which she rarely went to anymore since she wasn't a couple and was tired on the weekends, or evenings that were related to business, which were necessary but not much fun. This was very different.

'Actually, my day was a bitch,' she answered him

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honestly. 'I'm glad it's Friday. I need a couple of days off. How was yours?'

'Interesting. I just interviewed a fascinating young entrepreneur. Harvey Eckles. He's made a billion dollars on the Internet, and he's twenty-three years old. He looks like he couldn't find his way out of a men's room with a flashlight. But he's a genius, and talking to him was like meeting Einstein. I didn't understand a thing he said, which is why he made that kind of money and I didn't. But it was fun.' He was smiling at Fiona and looked relaxed.

'What you do must be really fascinating. I had an internship at a newspaper when I was in college, but I discovered that I can't write anything interesting to save my life, just business reports. I got a C-minus in creative writing, which was the worst grade I ever got.'

'I got a D in Journalism 101, which is why I decided to do that for a living. It's worked out really well for me. You probably had too much talent,' he said, and they both laughed as the waitress came over and took their order. Logan ordered a cheeseburger with everything on it, while Fiona ordered a plain burger and fries. He ordered a Heineken, and she a Diet Coke. 'So what do you do on the weekends for fun, Fiona?' He seemed interested.

'Work,' she said, and they both laughed again. 'Unfortunately, that's true. I take work home on

weekends, otherwise I can't keep up. I have so many interruptions in the office, and scheduled meetings, it doesn't leave me much time to fill in the gaps. And I hang out with my kids, when they're home, which isn't often anymore. So I fill the void with work,' she admitted, and he was watching her eyes as she talked. He saw a sadness there about her children and how much she missed them. And he didn't think she had a man in her life, or she wouldn't have had dinner with him, or filled her weekends with work. Those were the activities of a woman who had nothing else to do. He knew the symptoms well, and worked a lot on weekends too. And he had no children to fill holidays and vacations, just friends, which was enough for him.

'How did you manage to bring up kids and have a career like yours?' A lot of women he knew didn't, and wound up with screwed-up kids who resented them, or they regretted never having them at all. And from what she said, he got the feeling her kids were okay and he could tell that they were close and she enjoyed them.

'I'm a good juggler,' she said confidently. 'I returned calls when I took Alyssa to ballet, and I managed to get to almost all of Mark's soccer games, with my BlackBerry of course. And I worked at night when everyone went to bed. I didn't get a lot of sleep.'

'Margaret Thatcher slept three hours a night,' he informed her, 'and she ran a country. I think people who

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don't need a lot of sleep have it made. They conquer the world while the rest of us are snoring for eight hours. I fall apart if I don't get seven hours myself, which is why I'll never be more than a lowly reporter, while you run one of the biggest corporations in the country.'

'Yeah,' she said, smiling as she shrugged off the compliment, 'but there are other things I can't do. A lot of them in fact. I'm terrible at sports, except for tennis, which my sister made me play all my life and still does, and she's a fantastic player. I'm a lousy cook, according to my children. My son cooks better than I do. And according to my ex-husband, I was a terrible wife, and flunked seventeen years of it, so I guess you can't do everything. The woman he married after me makes her own Christmas decorations and is a fabulous cook and never worked. So I guess I got that one wrong from the beginning, but we have wonderful kids.' She looked happy as she said it, and at peace.

'I'll be sure to call your successor when I decorate my tree. I'm not sure making your own Christmas decorations makes someone a good wife, Fiona. Who did he marry? Martha Stewart?' She laughed out loud and then looked serious for a minute.

'No, just a woman who hates the business world as much as he does. I think they have fun together. We never did. I was too busy trying to be the perfect wife and mother, and trying to do a good job at whatever company

I worked for. It was pretty intense.’ And so were the arguments and the unhappy years, but she didn’t say that to him.

‘It doesn’t sound like a match made in heaven to me. Like my wife. She would have buried me in Salt Lake, working at her father’s printing business and having a baby every year. We make some pretty stupid choices when we’re young. Some of us make stupid choices when we’re older too. I lived with a woman for about four years, ten years ago. It was kind of a loose arrangement, looser than I thought I signed on for. I found out she was sleeping with at least three of my friends. She thought monogamy was “unnatural” for humans. I still had a few illusions about that, which is admittedly limited of me. She’s actually still living with my best friend. They have two kids but never married. And it seems to work for them. We all have our own crazy ideas about what makes relationships work. The trick seems to be finding someone with similar ideas, or compatible ones at least. I’ve never managed to pull that off. And like you, I work too hard. My last girlfriend said I was a workaholic, and she’s right. And in my case, I travel too much, covering stories. I was in South Africa for six months when I worked on the Mandela pieces, and I wish I had stayed longer. I loved it. And I travel for stories whenever I get the chance. It keeps life exciting.’

‘I only travel for work,’ Fiona said with a look of regret.

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‘The kids always want me to go to exotic places with them, and I never have time, or it seems too complicated, or I’m tired. I keep promising to take them to Japan, and I haven’t yet. Maybe one of these days.’ But she didn’t look as though it was going to happen anytime soon. ‘My sister is much better about that. She’s in Tuscany this summer, visiting friends.’

‘Yeah, and from what you said, she doesn’t run a major corporation, or have kids. That makes a difference. I don’t know how you juggle what you do. And I’ll bet you weren’t a “terrible wife,” no matter what your ex says. I have more faith in you than that.’ He could already sense that she was a perfectionist about everything she did, and tried her best, or she wouldn’t have had the job she did, and healthy kids.

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence. But he may be right. He’s still pissed off about it, even now that he’s married to “Martha Stewart.”’ She had a feeling the name was going to stick now that he’d come up with it.

‘That’s pretty pathetic if he’s still carrying a grudge, after how long?’

‘Six years.’

‘And what about you? Anyone important in your life since?’ He acted like a reporter even when he was out for dinner, and he wanted to know everything about her. She liked finding out about him too, and he was forthcoming about himself. He didn’t seem like a man who had secrets,

and he appeared to have good insights into himself. He wasn't unaware and knew who he was and how he related to other people.

'No,' she answered his question honestly. 'A lot of blind dates at first, set up by friends who felt sorry for me when David and I broke up. And they were unbelievably bad. Most men run screaming from the room when they find out you run a company and figure you're a bitch. The ones who stick around are deaf, dumb, or blind, or all three, or recently out of prison. Besides, I really don't have time. My life works the way it is.'

'And how is it?' he asked with interest. He wondered how she perceived it. He saw her as a fabulous woman going to waste if she didn't have a man in her life at her age. He thought some lucky guy was missing out big-time if he hadn't realized how remarkable Fiona was, and her ex-husband sounded like a loser to him.

'My life is peaceful, busy, and sane. That works for me,' she said, and looked as though she meant it. 'No one is accusing me of what I did wrong, hating me for my career, or telling me how bad I am. I don't think you can have a relationship, or a marriage, and a career like mine. I tried and it doesn't work. No man, or damn few, can put up with a woman who has a bigger career than he does, or even one just as big, and worse yet if she makes more money. My ex-husband punished me for it for seventeen years. I have no desire to sign on for that. It was



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miserable, although I tried to pretend it wasn't. But it was. Why would I want to do that again?'

'Not all men are as stupid as your ex-husband,' he said bluntly, 'or have such fragile egos. A man who's comfortable with himself ought to be able to respect you for your career, without punishing you for it. And if you got in a new relationship, what would you have to lose?' He made it sound theoretical, and she hoped he wasn't volunteering. She didn't want to get involved with him or anyone else. She really was happy as she was, despite her sister urging her to date again. It worked for Jillian, not for her.

'If I get involved again, I could lose my heart, my sanity, and my time. I'd kind of like to hang on to all three. And my self-esteem. I felt terrible about myself when my marriage failed. I don't want to feel like that again. It's taken six years for me to feel good about myself. I don't want to give that up for anyone. Why should I? I think with a career like mine, as a woman, relationships just don't work. A man who's successful in business is a hero. For a woman, it's entirely different. You become immediately suspect, and besides, it's not sexy being the CEO of a company. People act like you're a man in disguise.'

'If that's a disguise,' Logan said, grinning at her, and looking at her long blond hair, which made her look much younger when she wore it down, 'it's not working

for you. You still look like a girl to me.’ But he also dealt with people like her every day. He had interviewed hundreds of successful, important women, and he was neither fooled by the outer trappings that went with it, nor impressed by them. What he cared about was the person, male or female, not the title on the door, or how important they thought they were. And he liked Fiona as a human being, which counted for a lot for him. He was sure she would be a good friend if they had the opportunity to spend time together. And he thought she was shortchanging herself out of more. ‘I really don’t agree with you, Fiona. Just like you thought you could have a family and a career, I think one can have a relationship and a big career too. I haven’t found the right person, and I haven’t really been looking, but I know she’s out there. And you didn’t give up being a woman the day you became a CEO. I don’t think it’s a choice you have to make.’

‘I don’t have the time to find the right one,’ she said honestly, ‘and I really don’t want to. I don’t want all the headaches that go with it. At forty-nine, I feel too old.’

‘That’s bullshit. What if you live to be ninety? Do you really want to spend the next forty years alone? That seems kind of sad to me.’ But the seventeen miserable years of her marriage to David seemed a lot sadder to her, and she didn’t want to risk that again. She had never been as happy in her life as in the last six years.

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‘Maybe some people aren’t meant to live in pairs. I think I’m one of them.’

‘You’ve just got war wounds. If you want to, you’ll find the right guy one of these days.’

‘I don’t want to,’ she said firmly. ‘Trust me, no one is lining up to date female CEOs. It’s an occupational hazard. Our male counterparts seem to have all the fun, while all we do is work.’ Just like in real life, in her experience.

‘Sounds like a bad division of labor and ratio of perks to downsides to me. Besides, they may have all the fun, but look at the messes they get into. Bimbos, porn stars, blackmail, public apologies – they’re always having to kiss someone’s ass for the trouble they get into. It doesn’t look like fun to me.’

Fiona laughed. ‘Yeah, to me neither. Like Marshall Weston two months ago. He got out of that pretty quickly. It doesn’t always work that way, with the woman recanting within a day, and cleaning it all up. He got off lucky.’

‘I’m sure it wasn’t easy for him either,’ Logan said. ‘Who knows what contortions they went through to get him off the hook? I know there was a settlement, the terms of which were confidential. They must have paid her a fortune.’

‘He does a good job for UPI,’ she said fairly, hoping to change the subject. ‘He’s a terrific CEO.’

‘Smooth guy. I’ve interviewed him too.’ But he hadn’t liked him personally. Marshall was so slick that Logan had no idea who he was inside, and he hated subjects like that. It was like trying to look through a brick wall. By contrast, Fiona seemed open, honest, and transparent, and there was a human side to her that he liked. He liked her just as much as he admired her before, and possibly more now as he got to know her better. He really could conceive of being friends with her if she would ever let that happen, and of that he was not yet sure. She was very guarded about her private life and jealous of her time, of which she had very little.

‘I met Marshall’s wife when I interviewed him at his house in Ross,’ Logan volunteered. ‘She’s one of those perfect corporate wives who do everything right, are never too much in evidence but just enough, and you have no idea who they really are. She was kind of like this perfect robot when I met her, built for his exclusive use, to meet his every need. Women like that make me nervous. I always figure that one day they’ll lose it and go totally nuts and start shooting people from a church tower or something, after years of being treated like a machine and not a human being.’

Thinking about it, she had to admit, Liz Weston had looked a little strung out when she stood next to Marshall at the press conference on TV.

She had met a lot of women like her in the course of

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her career and had nothing in common with them. Theirs was a life of service, designed to meet their husband's every need, and their only sense of achievement seemed to be measured by their husband's success. It looked like living vicariously to Fiona, instead of having an identity and accomplishments of their own. It wouldn't have been enough for her. The marriages of those women, and the status symbols that went with them, appeared to be all they had. It gave her the creeps. She had tried hard to make David happy, but she had never been willing to give up herself or her dreams, and she had taken a beating for it, which was why marriage didn't appeal to her anymore. And she didn't want a 'corporate husband' to pay lip service to her, not that she had seen many in her lifetime. Those roles were almost always reserved for women. So many of the successful women she knew had wound up alone, just like her. It was the nature of the beast, and the price you had to be willing to pay. She had to carry her burdens and fight her battles alone; she couldn't imagine life otherwise anymore.

'Do you like baseball?' he asked then, changing the subject halfway through their burgers. He hadn't meant to get into a discussion about relationships with her, it had just happened, and she had been open to discussing the subject, which surprised him.

'Yes, I do. And football, although I never go to games.'

‘Let me guess,’ he teased her, ‘no time, and no one to go with. Well, if you’re amenable, at least that can change. I’m a baseball fanatic, and I have season tickets. Do you want to go with me sometime?’ She loved the idea of being pals with him, and she knew her sister would approve.

‘That sounds like fun,’ Fiona said, smiling at him.

‘Perfect. I’m going to hold you to it. How about next Saturday? There’s a home game.’ She nodded agreement, and he told her who was playing, and reeled off a slew of statistics to dazzle her.

‘You are a fanatic.’ She was impressed.

‘I’ve loved baseball since I was a kid. I used to dream about playing professionally when I grew up. No such luck. But I’m an avid fan.’ And he was happy to have an excuse to see her in a week. It wasn’t a date, just a baseball game. And it sounded great to both of them.

They talked longer than they planned that night. They eventually slid into politics, and from there to some of their favorite books. Fiona said she hated the fact that she had so little time to read current books, and he was extremely well read. But most of the reading she did was for work, which he understood. He was surprised that she read as much as she did, mostly nonfiction, and a novel once in a great while on vacation. She was always playing catch-up for work.

It was after nine o’clock when they finally left the bar. Fiona thanked him for dinner, and he told her he’d pick

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her up before the baseball game, and she said she'd drive in from Portola Valley and meet him in the city. It was too far for him to drive, and then have to drive her home again, and he said he'd call her and they'd make a plan. She wished him a good week until then, and they both drove off. She was pleased with herself for having had dinner with him. In her position, everything she did had to have a purpose and a goal. There were no random acts and associations, except for the time she spent with her children, which was entirely spontaneous and always enjoyable. But everything else she did was structured and planned. It had been nice having dinner with Logan at the last minute. And the bar in Palo Alto had been the perfect place for an easy dinner, where they could both relax.

And as Logan drove back to the city, he was thinking the same thing about her. It was hard to imagine any man feeling threatened by her, although he was sure that there were some who would, like her idiot ex-husband, who didn't sound like a good guy to him. And one thing was sure, as far as Logan was concerned, Fiona Carson deserved a good man. She was a lovely woman, and he was glad she'd come with him. And best of all, neither of them had talked about NTA all night. He had kept his word.