

PART ONE

PRELUDE

CHAPTER ONE

“I knew his old man well, and Richard is no Anthony Carlucci,” Ron Carlson said. “He’s thirty-three going on eighteen, in love with himself. I’m afraid he’s going to wreck the company.”

David Wilkens watched Richard adjust the microphone and tug his French cuff down so it peeked from under the sleeve of his Brioni suit. The onyx cufflinks had probably cost as much as David’s living room couch.

“Cut him some slack,” he said. “It’s only been a year and I think he’s really trying to move AGC forward.” As vice-president of sales, David had his own concerns.

“Good morning and happy Friday!” Richard’s voice boomed through the open office area. “Today marks a new day for Applied Genetic Corporation. When my father founded this business in 1962, people laughed. Selling bull sperm wasn’t exactly glamorous. Hell, it wasn’t even mentionable in certain circles. My mother was embarrassed to admit what her husband did for a living when she went to her bridge club. But today, AGC is...”

“It shouldn’t have gone down like this,” Ron whispered.

“The plaque on your door has *executive* in front of vice-president,” David said. “All capital letters—not so bad. And you had your chance.”

“You weren’t there!” Ron said. “How the hell was I supposed to take over when Anthony never put it in writing? Like I could gracefully rob the kid of his...legacy?”

Applause interrupted them.

“Like the new digs?” Richard gestured with a wide arm, his voice rising.

“And I can’t believe he had the walls painted red!” Ron said.

“Happens all the time with a regime change,” David said. “The contemporary imprint of a new generation.”

Ron indicated the open office area with a short jab of his thumb.

“So you like all this?”

Traditional metal desks had been replaced by kidney-shaped writing surfaces cantilevered on the panels of silver cubicles. Black matte lateral files lined the partitions. Museum-quality lighting assured that modern art by the likes of David Hockney and Julian Schnabel was shown prominently.

“I don’t dislike it.”

“Anthony would have—”

“Shhhhh.”

“But we’re not done yet, people!” Richard was pumping his fist now. “My father gave us a great foundation, but I have a bigger dream! We’re expanding our operations. We’re buying another champion bull. And R&D is on the verge of a new technology enabling us to ship frozen sperm with greater efficiency.

“Change is coming, people! Stand up, Blair Boyd.”

Blair Boyd was the shade of a Hershey’s chocolate kiss, six feet tall, fit, and prepossessing. Dressed in a stylish if conventional Hugo Boss suit, he stood up and nodded at the crowd.

“Walter Huggins, bless him, is retiring. Blair will be taking his place as the new CFO, so I expect all of you...”

“What do you know about Boyd?” Ron whispered.

“Absolutely nothing,” David said. “You ever tried to have a real conversation with the guy?”

Light clapping died down.

“One more thing, people? Use the new fitness center. Wellness is another one of our innovative directives. More sales, less overhead, especially in terms of health insurance, translates to higher bonuses.

Capice?

“So get on the treadmill, the elliptical – whatever you need to do. Healthy body, healthy mind.”

He took a step forward and assumed an Atlas pose.

Light laughter wafted through the area.

“Back to it, now. We’ve got a lot of work of to do if we’re going to bury Gen-Tech and the rest of the competition. It’s a new day. A better day. I have one last thing to say...”

Richard waited until every eye was on him.

“I expect all of you to be on board—or get the hell out of the way.”

David clapped as he moved forward, the light noise sounding forlorn in an uncomfortable silence. Carefully, he took the microphone from Richard.

“Richard. I think I speak for all of us when I say thank you for this.” His signature baritone voice commanded attention.

“It’s a tremendous perk, and while we don’t work *just* for the perks...they sure do help.” His infectious laughter dispelled the uneasiness.

“Let’s give it up for him, shall we? Round of applause for the boss?” He returned the microphone to its place as everybody clapped.

“Nice save,” Ron said when David again stood at his side.

“You should reel in that snarl. It won’t change anything.”

Stephanie could never understand how a woman as petite as Giovanna had the ability to part crowds. But that's exactly what she did when she came through the massive double doors of the Hillcrest Country Club ballroom the following evening. The formal event benefiting Multiple Sclerosis was already swirling with activity.

A passage opened as Giovanna made her way around the perimeter of the dance floor, her shoulder-length ebony hair gleaming under the soft light of crystal chandeliers. The muted gold color of her strapless sheath set off her fair skin. Stephanie reached out and squeezed her hand.

"You look stunning."

"Why, thank you!" Giovanna smoothed the sides of her floor-length gown. "I did work at it. You said there was someone you want me to meet?"

Stephanie pulled her towards a side door. "He owns a multi-million-dollar apartment in Water Tower Place in downtown Chicago, not to mention his company has the fifty-fifth and fifty-sixth floors of Sears Tower. He—"

"I don't care what he *has*, Stephanie."

"Then I won't tell you about the Lazara yacht he bought on *impulse* from The Robb Report. He keeps it at his home in Door County, Wisconsin."

"And you've waited this long to introduce us because..."

Stephanie pushed open the double doors and led Giovanna onto the terrace.

Like a green velour carpet, the golf course stretched before them flanked by oak trees tall and authoritative in their sheer girth. The gardens were lit softly, impatiens exploding with purples, orange, pinks.

It reminded Giovanna of a brightly colored ball gown tossed on the grass. The May night was warm. What would it feel like to throw off her dress and run barefoot through the silky darkness?

There was a man on the terrace. He must not have heard them, because he hadn't turned around.

"Richard," Stephanie said as they reached him.

The man startled, his glass crashing to the terrace.

"I'm so sorry!" Stephanie scrambled to brush the spilled drink from his jacket with her bare hand.

"My fault. What a waste of Glenlevit," he said. "It took eighteen years to get it to its peak."

He was nearly six feet tall and every inch Italian, right down to the black wavy hair and a gorgeous mouth. Stephanie abandoned her clean-up and turned to Giovanna.

"Richard, this is Jonathan's partner in his commercial real estate business. The one I was telling you about. Giovanna Sabbatini, this is Richard Carlucci, my childhood neighbor and friend."

There was a slight hesitation before he spoke.

"Well, Giovanna Sabbatini, Stephanie can tell you I'm not always this clumsy."

"We did sort of sneak up on you." Giovanna smiled. "I just hope you don't accidentally drop your samples like that."

“Excuse me?”

She chuckled softly. “I understand you sell bull sperm.”

He looked at her for a long moment.

“Guilty as charged. I suppose you think commercial real estate has more...what, panache?”

His words sounded pinched. She’d overstepped.

“No offense, I hope?”

“None taken,” he said too quickly. “My company sells the best bull sperm in the world.”

“Could we start over?” Giovanna held out her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Carlucci.”

His grasp was warmer even than his smile.

“Make that Richard, please.”

“He calls himself eccentric,” Stephanie said later, in the ladies room. “That’s certainly true.”

“Outré isn’t necessarily a bad thing. I’ve never imagined myself with somebody ordinary, but girlfriend to girlfriend...I’m asking if you *like* him.”

“He’s a little unhinged, that’s all.”

“Stephanie, ‘unhinged’ covers a *lot*. What do you mean?”

“His parents were killed in a car accident just over a year ago, and boom, he becomes president of Applied Genetic Corp. Not exactly the succession his father planned, I think.”

Giovanna applied a fresh layer of lipstick and blotted it carefully.

“My mother’s death was a terrible time for me. Losing both parents and taking over a multi-million-dollar company all at once would unhinge anybody.”

“The vice president, Ron Carlson, was supposed to take over,” Stephanie said. “I’m not sure how it all came down, but Richard’s in charge now.”

Giovanna’s eyes met Stephanie’s in the mirror.

“He looks like a player. I’m thirty-one—”

“He’s had his share of bimbos and he’s ready to settle down. I’ve known him most of my life. He was a neighbor, our parents were close. He was amazingly kind to me when we were in high school and my dad was diagnosed with MS. He went to college in Wisconsin, we sort of lost touch and since he’s been working so hard, Jonathan and I hardly ever see him. I just get the sense that he needs a strong woman, you know?”

Giovanna laughed and closed her purse.

“Don’t they all?”

“The bitch seat.” Richard pointed to the Harley. “Climb on.”

It was their third date. Giovanna enjoyed the way his tailored jeans hugged his figure.

“Me?” she said.

“That’s what they call it. When you have a girl on the back.”

Giovanna was nervous. She loved adventure, but she was used to being in the driver's seat. Richard made sure her helmet was properly fastened, then eased away from the curb. Even over the din of traffic, the sound of the bike was powerful. She took a deep breath and tightened her arms around his waist.

Lake Michigan was garnished with whitecaps like marshmallow fluff, but Lake Shore Drive was crowded with pedestrians and buses. Richard skillfully maneuvered through them then accelerated.

"You okay?" he shouted.

Giovanna gave him a thumbs-up. "Faster!"

His laugh blew by her as he shifted gears and sped up.

When he leaned into the turn leading to Oak Street Beach, he reached back with his hand and held her leg protectively. Suddenly she relaxed, the simple gesture custodial and endearing.

She felt invigorated from the ride. Giovanna spread the blanket in a small corner of Centennial Park; Richard pulled a bottle of champagne from the saddlebag of his bike.

"So we've established that we like the same kind of music, artwork, architecture," he said. "Now for the defining question. Do you like football?"

"Addicted! Off-season is torture for me." Leaning closer, she whispered, "I know it's illegal here in Chicagoland, but I love Brett Favre."

"A woman of discernment! On his worst day, he's still the best quarterback in the NFL." He lowered himself to the ground and sat next to her.

After he expertly uncorked the bottle and poured, she accepted a brimming flute.

He raised his glass. “To all things that come from heaven! And I do mean to include you, Giovanna Sabbatini.”

His chestnut eyes locked onto hers as they sipped. She felt a butterfly flitter though her solar plexus.

“Start at the beginning, I want to know everything about you. Brothers and sisters? Parents still alive?”

“Only child. Never knew my dad. He died when I was two, so mother went to work and raised me. She died when I was twenty-three.”

“A single parent,” he said softly. “That must have been so hard for both of you. What kind of work did your mother do?”

“She cleaned other people’s houses.”

“Your mother was a *cleaning lady*?”

Why did he have to go and ruin it?

“She had courage and dignity and sacrificed everything for me and my education!”

He looked like he’d been slapped. She didn’t care.

“I didn’t inherit a company, Richard. But I did inherit a tremendous sense of purpose and commitment, and a burning need to succeed. From a *cleaning lady*.”

The blanket bunched under her as she twisted away from him. He stretched to grab her hand.

“I’m sorry, that didn’t come out right. I was just surprised—really. What she did is admirable, of course. And look at you! A beautiful, successful testament to all her hard work.”

She didn’t quite know how to extricate her hand, which he was still holding. His was very warm.

“I’m serious. You’re in a tough business in a town where the competition is ferocious. Your dad died when you were a baby, so that strength has to have come from her.” She faced him, searching for sincerity in his face. What she thought she saw there was anxiety.

“I’m sorry, Giovanna. I know what it’s like to lose a parent—I lost both of mine not so long ago.”

He pulled her to him and cupped the back of her head with his hand, and when the tip of her chin found a soft spot on his neck, she acquiesced.

CHAPTER TWO

Riding shotgun as Richard's Porsche sped north, David glanced sideways at his boss.

"It wasn't that bad," Richard said.

"Tell me, so I won't be surprised if I hear it from them."

"I just told him I heard when the cows see his truck coming up the road, they all sit down."

David clamped his hand over the lid of his cup, and swallowed his sip of coffee before it spilled along with his laughter.

"That's really funny," he said when they recovered themselves.

"Well, he didn't think so. Why is everybody is so fucking sensitive these days?"

"I'll take care of it," David said. "I'll give him a call."

"And say what?"

"I don't know yet. Don't worry about it, I'll handle it. I always do." He was looking ahead as the Milwaukee skyline came into view. It took a moment for him to register the silence, then he glanced at Richard's face.

"It was funny, Richard."

He grinned. "Maybe they *do* sit down when he drives by."

"We'll keep it between us, and do me a favor? Put that gem in the in-house joke box."

“All right, all right.” Richard heaved a theatrical sigh. “Why am I going to Belmont, Wisconsin again?”

“You said it was too beautiful to sit in the office,” David said. “This is just a howdy-doo. It’s a spring cattle sale and some of these folks are our customers, some of them aren’t. It’s a glad-hander. You’re good at that.”

David relaxed for the next few miles, contemplating the waves of August heat migrating across I-94.

“Silver Spring is coming up. We have time to stop at Kopp’s for their world-famous burger.”

Richard downshifted and eased smoothly into the right lane when the exit sign came into view. The neon Kopp’s sign looked subdued in the bright sunlight as they entered the parking lot.

The famous burger house had no indoor seating. While Richard got their food, David stood waiting for an outdoor table. It was in the low eighties, winds were light, but traffic was heavy on Silver Spring Drive as people left their houses for summer fun.

“Why do I get to do all the heavy lifting?” Richard was smiling and holding two large malts and a white bag already saturated with the juices of two enormous hamburgers.

David nodded toward a couple vacating a small table. After fanning napkins across their laps, they tucked into the feast.

“Speaking of heavy lifting, Richard. . .”

“Are you about to tell me the majority of the lifting is sales?”

“I appreciate that you let me do my thing. That’s what I’m trying to say. You’re rarely in my face and I’m grateful for it.”

“You bring in the numbers, that’s what counts,” Richard said.

“I do my best and I’ve got a great team.” David gathered the remains of their lunch and walked to the trash container.

Richard stretched, then ran a hand over his flat abdomen.

“I’ll have to run another five miles on the treadmill. Thank God I don’t live near Kopp’s. Getting a belly, Wilkens?”

David beheld his crisp white shirt tucked neatly into the waist of his jeans. “My waist is only an inch bigger than when I was in college.” He patted his belt.

“Still, a few miles—”

“Okay, I’m not Mr. World like you. You’re bar-hopping, dating...speaking of dating—”

Richard advanced towards the Porsche. “She’s unbelievable.”

“Is this Giovanna we’re talking about?” David slid into the small seat.

Heads pivoted as Richard revved the powerful engine. He backed out of the space slowly and shifted into first gear. As he accelerated to leave the parking lot, he tipped his hand to the crowd.

“She’s beautiful and smart. Half-owner of a commercial real estate firm. And very independent.”

He steered the car toward the ramp. The turbo kicked in as he accelerated onto the expressway, forcing David’s head backward into the headrest.

Richard shifted into third gear. “Nothing like breaking a filly.”

David drew back and peered over the top of his glasses.

Richard shifted into high gear and laughed. “I’m kidding. I love her independence.”

“So bring her around,” David said. “We’d all love to meet her.”

“I’ll give it a few months...see where it goes.” He steered the Porsche into the left lane.

“Hmmm...you like this one,” David said.

“A lot.”

It was a bitter Chicago day, and Giovanna was flushed from her walk and the anticipation of meeting Richard’s co-workers.

Mentally leafing through calendar pages, she was surprised when she ticked off seven months. Almost total immersion in her business had been punctuated by white roses (her favorite) and champagne cocktails (her second favorite), and an occasional romantic weekend in Door County with lunches and dinners in between.

As she sped upward in the elevator, it occurred to her that Richard’s introducing her to the AGC employees was akin to bringing a girlfriend home to meet the family.

She was grateful for his welcoming smile as she stepped out of the elevator. Before he reached her, a short, stocky man stepped between them.

“I’m Ron Carlson. Executive Vice-President.” He shook her outstretched hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Giovanna.”

“Thank you, same here.”

Richard, with a hand on her back, said, “And this is David Wilkens, our invaluable Vice-President of Sales.”

So this was Richard's #2 man.

"At last," he said in a voice that was deep and resonant. He smiled and grasped her hand.

Giovanna felt instantly comfortable in the path of his smile. The voice, the smile, his medium build and height couched in a confident stance, his quiet poise—somehow all of it projected an un-self-conscious charisma. His wife, Giovanna knew, had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer.

"It's really nice to meet you, David," she said with a big smile, looking solicitously into the blue-gray eyes magnified by thick lenses. Dark brown frames hid laugh lines and made him look barely thirty, but Giovanna knew he was pushing forty.

"And the new guy, Blair Boyd—our CFO," Richard said. Blair bent slightly at the waist, smiling.

"The chivalrous one." She returned his bow with a curtsy.

"Lily, my assistant." Richard waved in her direction.

"Hi, there." Giovanna could barely hear her. She might have said "Tie pear."

"Well, we're heading out to lunch," Richard said. "I won't be long, Lily."

Standing on a modern mosaic of the company logo, he shrugged into a navy cashmere coat, his wavy image reflected in the etched stainless doors behind him. Turning, he stepped into the path of a male employee.

"Sorry, Richard! I have to get copies of these sales invoices for—"

In a blink, the man was face-first against a wall and Richard was pressing his groin into his buttocks, right hand locked onto his shoulder.

"Sal ... watch my new shoes." Richard was smiling. "I'm still the head bull."

The release was as quick as the capture.

Speechless, Giovanna's eyes darted around as nervous titters filled the hallway. The man twisted and hurried away, red-faced, the line of his mouth like a jigsaw puzzle piece set in upside down.

Ron Carlson rushed forward, his high-pitched laugh punctuating the sudden silence.

“Sorry about that, I'm afraid it's like a boy's club here—locker room antics, Giovanna. Maybe it's the nature of our business. It's tasteless but harmless, really.”

The elevator doors opened and she stepped on, not caring whether Richard was behind her. He rushed through the opening before the doors closed.

Blair twisted to face Ron. “What the hell was that? Jesus, doesn't he understand the liability—”

“It's just bullshit, pardon the expression.”

“You better tell him to cut that ‘bullshit’ out.”

“I know, I know.” Ron hurried down the hallway. “Sal, wait up!”

He was fumbling with his stack of invoices when Ron reached him.

“He only does that to people he likes, you know?” Ron said.

Sal kept his head down, still clutching his papers.

Ron chucked him on the arm. “Don't take it the wrong way. It's his way of welcoming you to the club.”

“Got to go.” Sal backed away, humiliation still pinking his face.

David stepped into Ron's office and closed the door.

"So, did you smooth that out, or should I talk to him?"

"I covered it," Ron said.

"Sal is someone I'd like to groom for sales," David said. "We have a good rapport, so if you need me to—"

"I handled it! He won't hear a peep from Sal."

"Way to keep *il duce* happy," David said.

"*Il duce*?" Ron knew it was funny, but he didn't smile.

"I overheard it in customer service after his 'get the hell out of the way' speech."

Ron took off his suit jacket and walked towards the stainless coat tree in the corner.

"Damn it! He needs to grow up—stop living large with the penthouse and the cars and run the business like a grown-up. If it were me—"

"Give it a rest. If you can't move past this thing, there are other companies and you're a bright guy." David eyes shifted slightly as he viewed a framed color photo of Ron and Anthony Carlucci standing together beside the very first ACG barn.

Irony permeated the print: a collision of promise and failed objective. Anthony's wizened broad face beamed confidence; his arm slung around Ron's shoulder ensured the young man's future.

Ron sank into his executive leather chair; his shoulders hunched. "This is all I've ever known."

David looked at him for a long moment. Better change the subject.

“What did you think of Giovanna?”

“She’s a looker, I’ll give you that,” Ron said. “He needs a smart one. You know the old saying, behind every successful man? That’s what he needs. That’s what WE need.”

“After that little display with Sal, we’ll be lucky to see her again.”

Giovanna zigzagged as she navigated the busy sidewalk.

“What WAS that?” her deep voice growled between clenched teeth.

Richard grabbed her mink-sheathed arm.

“A joke!”

“To whom?” she said. “I can assure you it wasn’t a joke to him. I saw his face.”

“Sal? Come on Giovanna, you don’t even know him! I do it all the time, it’s funny. Like Ron said, ‘locker-room antics’.”

She stopped so suddenly he was jerked backwards, still gripping her arm.

“*Sal’s* face was red with embarrassment, Richard. He’s an employee, for God’s sake! You pay him! That’s harassment—it’s aberrant, illegal behavior. I can’t believe they put up with that—any of them!”

The maitre de escorted them to their favorite table. An easy walk from Sears Tower, Pazzo's at 311 had become a preferred lunch spot when their schedules allowed an interlude. The romance of the setting was lost today.

He shook his head. "You are making way too much of this."

She held her eyes steady and took a few calming breaths.

"That behavior disgusts me. The executive office of a corporation is no place for 'locker room antics'. The look on that man's face said everything."

"How do you do it?" he murmured.

"Do what?"

"At Choice Realty. Your employees love you—hell, they do anything you ask, and even things you never ask for."

"Simple," she said. "I respect them."

"I respect my employees!"

"You think behavior like that is *respectful*?" She shook her white napkin as if it were an enemy. "Let me clarify. You do something to Sal YOU think is funny but he obviously doesn't. You keep doing it, ignoring his feelings, his perspective...hell, that's an 'I'm the boss, I can do whatever I want' sledgehammer!"

"I never thought of it that way." He lowered his head. "I was just teasing him."

"Not funny." She was glaring at him. "I try to inspire employees with encouragement and validation. Not intimidate them through fear and shame."

Richard shifted in his seat. He looked uncomfortable as hell. *Good.*

“What makes you think you need to resort to such ugly behavior when your aptitude clearly makes that kind of...coercion unnecessary?”

His voice was low, his eyes rueful. Had she really gotten through to him?

“I don’t know. I feel so driven to make AGC better, bigger. To be honest, I’ve never been sure if Anthony believed in me. Sometimes I think I’m spending my whole life trying to please a dead man.”

Giovanna blinked. His face was earnest and so full of need.

“It’s not easy, but I know you can do it. You can make AGC your own with the support and the admiration of your employees.”

She fixed her eyes on his handsome face. “But that’s a misbegotten road to respect. Don’t step on your people—that’s just wrong. And humiliation isn’t the road to respect. You don’t have to convince *anybody* you’re the boss—you have the power.”

“I love you, Giovanna. So much.” His smile bloomed, vulnerability over and done with.

She lifted her hand to intertwine her fingers with his.

“You’ll apologize to Sal?” she said. “And promise me you’ll stop that? It seriously makes my stomach turn.”

He bent his head and kissed the top of her hand. Very slowly. When he finally lifted his head, his smile was radiant.

“I promise,” he said.

Giovanna delivered the reward.

“I love you, too.”

CHAPTER THREE

Richard stepped down from his treadmill as Lily was pouring his coffee. She handed him a flowery get-well card.

“You couldn’t possibly forget something so—”

“Of course not, but David never talks about his wife’s cancer,” he said.

“He’s private, you know that.”

Richard stared as the half moon of her breasts crested above the scoop neck of her tight sweater. Not even a freckle rode her fair skin.

“Shit, Lily, he was cracking jokes this morning”

“Ron says she’s terminal now. Please sign the card and give it back to me, I’m passing it around today. We’re sending it with flowers—I want to get it to the florist.”

He scribbled his signature on the bottom of the card and handed it back to her.

“What’s with the sweater?”

She leaned over his desk, her wide face beaming. Damn, he’d have to spell it out.

“We’re running an office here, Lily. You’re Assistant to the Chairman of the Board.”

“I thought you liked this top.” She backed away slowly, pouting. She didn’t do a good pout. “Don’t expect me to look as classy as Giovanna. I can’t afford *her* labels. Not that you two don’t—”

“That’s a private matter, Lily.” Richard fixed a hard stare on his assistant. “Now, I’ve got

things to do—”

“I get it, Richard.”

He shook his head as she left, her short blond hair bouncing with each determined step.

The rhythm didn't quite fit with the exaggerated sway of her hips. Of course she slammed the door.

He leaned back in his leather chair and looked out at the Chicago skyline. Tops of skyscrapers disappeared through pillows of gray clouds. He thought he could feel a gentle shift as the wind began buffeting the building. His mind coiled around a memory of Giovanna Sabbatini.

She'd left his bed early this morning but he could still smell her hair.

The arch of her back as she lost control had laid bare the depth of her need. He was still surprised that she'd awakened in him such an appetite to please. And then, after a while, he'd been amazed at all the parts of their bodies that kept finding each other without the slightest effort, like they wanted to be together....

He reached for the phone and dialed. He closed his eyes when he heard her husky voice.

“I miss you,” he whispered.

A stiff wind had snow flurries dancing frenetically outside the window of Richard's office.

Stepping off the treadmill in the corner, he wiped his damp face with a towel.

“I think you should marry her,” Ron said. “A year of dating is a long time at your age.”

David sat forward on the couch. “It sure is. And she's a good influence on our resident bachelor. You're actually showing up on time.”

The employees of AGC credited Giovanna with *il duce's* improved behavior. It made her a popular figure.

"I'm going to marry her," Richard said. "I think she needs me, she just doesn't know it yet."

Ron and David exchanged looks.

"I think you need each other," Ron said

"What the fuck does that mean?" Richard said.

"Nothing," Ron said. "Just that she's been good for you."

David held up his hand. "Hey, you're clearly taking the company in a new direction. Expanding our R&D, focusing on a new patent for transport of frozen sperm—all good, all you. But you have to admit, she's bright, she's fun to have around, and she ain't bad to look at. If you don't marry her, we should hire her."

"Her career is hers and mine is mine. That's it, no more. Speaking of the patent..." Richard leaned forward in his chair. "Is that the file?" He peered over his coffee mug. "Wilkins, you should get your ass on that treadmill. I mean really, there's no excuse for five-eight or whatever you are—you could look better with just a little effort."

David and Ron carefully avoided looking at one another.

With spring and summer past, the promise of a long winter rode a howling Chicago wind this November evening. Richard and Giovanna were seated in their usual booth at The Saloon Steakhouse on Chestnut Street.

Overcrowding warmed the room and Giovanna was just beginning to relax. She was still sipping her first champagne cocktail as Richard downed his second Glenlivet on the rocks.

She sensed his eyes on her as she read the wood plank that served as a menu. She softened just seeing the look in his eyes.

“Long day, Al, give us a little more time to unwind...” The waiter wheeled away the cart displaying raw steaks as Richard shooed him with his napkin.

“You know you’re a perfect idiot,” Giovanna said when she stopped laughing.

“You know I’m insanely in love with you, don’t you?”

Her eyes shifted downward, the small brown spot on the white tablecloth becoming her new object of interest.

“What do you say we get married? We’re crazy about each other. How many times are you going to make me ask?”

She felt his hand wrap around hers and her eyes rose to meet his. The room faded around her and became strangely silent. Giovanna, famous for being quick on the uptake, was mute. Richard seemed to be enjoying looking at her so much he didn’t mind. Nobody had ever looked at her with so much...hunger.

“I love my career,” she said finally. “Choice Realty is growing so fast, and Jonathan and I work beautifully together. I can’t imagine doing anything else. Ever.”

“I would never ask you to sacrifice something you’ve worked so hard to achieve. Your drive, your intelligence is what draws me to you.” He touched her chin lightly, raising it so their eyes met.

“Giovanna, watching you pursue your career goals has taught me so much.” He paused for a few seconds. “Don’t you have some biological tick-tock reminding you that you’re thirty-two and it’s—”

“The age card? You sound like Stephanie! I don’t want children, Choice Realty is my baby. It makes me happy.”

He didn’t look concerned, not one smidge. He looked relaxed, happy.

“Have I ever talked about having kids? If you don’t want kids, we won’t have them.” He took her other hand, sandwiching both between his. “I like the person I become when I’m with you.” A short laugh escaped. “Apparently, so does everyone else.”

“Richard, I—”

“I want to share your bed more than a few nights a week. I want to dab your nose when you have the sniffles and I want to cuddle with you when I’ve had a bad day. I want to have sex like we have sex for the rest of our lives. We won’t be giving anything up, we’ll be getting so much more—”

She reached across the table and laid a finger softly against his lips.

“You’re very eloquent,” she said. “But I have to go to the ladies room.”

The bathroom mirror seemed to undulate as she absently applied lip liner. He’d asked her before. But instinct told her tonight was different—he wanted an answer, not another “Give me a little more time.”

She peered at her reflection, wondering how different her life would be without him. Timing was everything.

A kind man had emerged during the course of their courtship. He sent flowers to her office weekly and rubbed her feet after a long day pounding the pavement. A bottle of champagne welcomed her when she came home from a closing.

Her cheeks flushed as she thought of his intensity in bed. It matched and sometimes exceeded hers; other times it relented, allowing her desires to rocket past his as he brought her to climax.

She smoothed her hair, puckered her lips for an application of gloss, and made her way back to the table. He stood up and pulled out her chair. She waited for him to reseal himself before she spoke.

“It’s just such a commitment. I mean, what exactly are your expectations, if we get married?”

Richard pushed his tumbler of scotch to the side and crossed his hands on the table.

“First, you’re no stranger to commitment, and I have no expectations beyond your happiness. I promise you, the biggest change will be walking into a different front door every night. What is it? The closet? I’ll build you a cedar walk-in of your own.”

“How clever of you to remind me of the important things.” Giovanna sipped her champagne. “When?”

His eyes were glittering. “Now. Tonight. Let’s get on a plane and go to Las Vegas.”

“We can’t do that!”

“And tell me why not, my beautiful lady! I have no parents, no siblings, and neither do you, so who’s to stop us? We’re adults, independent thinkers, and we can do as we damn well please.”

“I have to call Jonathan and Stephanie—”

“Why do you have to call them? Or is this about a church wedding?”

“I’ve never wanted a church wedding—”

“Then let’s go. We’ll charter a jet and be there in a few hours.”

“But Richard! I should p-pack....”

“We’ll buy what we need when we get there.”

“I’m working a big deal, I have a client meeting Monday morning at eight.”

“We’ll be back Sunday night.”

She examined his handsome face. All that confidence he exuded—arrogance, even—couldn’t entirely mask the vulnerability. Richard was damaged, but who wasn’t? She could fix him.

She reached across the table and took his hand.

“And the ring, Richard?”

“Ah yes, the ring.” He reached into his suit coat pocket. “I had a feeling you’d want to know about the ring. I’ve been carrying this around for two weeks.”

Slowly he opened the lid to a blue Tiffany box and held a three-carat cushion-cut diamond set in platinum between his index finger and thumb.

“It’s a three-carat, baby. What do you think of *that*?”

“It won’t fit.”

“Hey, I know your ring size, Tiffany has it on file. You haven’t even tried it on. How do you know it won’t fit?”

“Because,” Giovanna said with a dazzling smile, “I’m definitely a five carat.”

“Did you get the cigars?” David was leaning in the doorway of Blair’s office

“I thought that was for new babies, not newlyweds,” Blair said.

David laughed. “Okay, then give me a better idea. A crystal vase?”

“I’ve only been here a year. How am I supposed to know what he’d like?” Blair relaxed back in his chair. There was something off about his smile. No, it was the eyes. David entered the office and closed the door behind him.

“I’m serious about getting you to lunch,” Blair said, “but it seems our schedules are always in conflict.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. The few times I’ve gone for drinks after work, you weren’t able to—”

“I’m sorry, David.” Blair leaned forward. “How is she? Your wife, I mean.”

“We still have hope—not a lot—but thanks, anyway.”

Blair walked to the corner table and held up a carafe. “Coffee?”

“Sure, sure.” His thumb found the back of his wedding band and he stroked it absently.

“I’ve thought about you, though, those evenings at the bar when I’m trading rounds of scotch with Richard. God knows you’ve had years of practice.”

David laughed. “I see Ron hasn’t really covered the important stuff.”

Blair handed him a mug and moved back behind his desk. “Okay, shoot.”

“Richard says he won’t drink anything but Glenlevit eighteen-year-old, but if it’s your turn to buy a round, go for the house brand. It’s half the price and in all these years, I’ve never been caught.”

Blair’s mouth curved into a wide grin. “You’re kidding.”

David returned the grin. “Hell, no, I’m giving you a valuable tip about executive management. Cigars are different, though. Stick with Davidoff, he can read the label. And I suspect you’re about to round the corner with Lily.”

Blair shrugged. “She clearly doesn’t like me.”

“Liking you has no relation to that smirk. Everyone from Newark has a mouth like that.” David crimped his upper lip. “But after a little more than a year, she’ll adjust to the fact that you’re not going anywhere and that you harbor no ill will towards her charge.”

Blair smile was brighter. “Some guard dog, huh?”

“And when he’s in town, Richard checks the gym every day at eight o’clock. Get there a few minutes before and be stepping off the treadmill when he pops his head through the door. Believe me, it beats hearing the fat ass jibes, and it’s not near as tiring as walking on the damn thing for an hour.”

“Is that what you do?”

David tugged his lapels. “I try not to take off my sport coat.” He got up and walked to the door. “Lunch? We can get that vase, or whatever, at Marshall Field’s. He won’t be in until later this afternoon, something about moving Giovanna’s clothes—”

“Love to, but I can’t today.” Blair reached behind him and handed David a neatly wrapped box. “I did get the cigars, though.”

David smiled. “Ron handles the HR stuff, but if you need the real lowdown, I’m your man. I’m not worried about being next in line.”

“I can see that.”

“Don’t hesitate to ask.”

David headed back to his office. Warm voice. Friendly smile that never reached his eyes, which never changed. David prided himself on reading people and yet he couldn't read the CFO. But he did know one thing about Blair Boyd. He didn't give a shit about David's wife.