

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 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.”

“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 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 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.

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, 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 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 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.”

“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 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 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, 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 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 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, 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 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 hardworking 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 relationship between father and oldest son was not easy. And in some ways they were a lot alike. They were bullheaded 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 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 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 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 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 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.