

CHAPTER ONE

BETROTHAL BETRAYAL

"We need to talk."

"Jake. What are you doing here? You're not supposed to see the bride before the wedding. Have a little patience, honey," Jenna teased.

Jake looked at the organized chaos that was the bridal suite. Jenna and her three friends were still in their robes. The hairdresser and the makeup artist had just finished and were packing up.

"I don't think I can do this. Actually, I know I can't," Jake stated.

"Can't do what?" Jenna asked.

"I ... It's just too much," Jake said, putting his hands in his pockets.

"It's just nerves, sweetie. You'll be fine once the ceremony begins," Jenna said soothingly.

"No. I don't think so."

"Jacob Murdock, the ceremony is scheduled to begin in thirty minutes. Get ahold of yourself."

"People are talking about you," Jake accused.

"Of course, people are talking about me. I'm the bride," Jenna said, exasperated.

"Not like that. Not in a good way," Jake said, starting to pace. "People are saying that you've been unfaithful."

Jenna's friends gasped at the accusation. Jenna narrowed her eyes at her fiancé. She turned to make sure that the videographer was recording everything before facing her erstwhile fiancé.

"That's quite the accusation on my wedding day. Who exactly is saying this? Jake, we've been dating since college. That's four years, and we've been engaged for a whole year. You know me. Why are you, all of a sudden, coming here to tell me that you don't want to marry me based on idle gossip? I want an explanation, and it had better be good."

Jake stuck out his chin. "Mother said she saw you. She saw you kiss another man."

"Jake. Your mother has been trying to get you to break up with me since we got engaged. Who exactly did she see me kiss? I want names."

"She didn't know the man, but it was in front of Highland House last week. She saw you go in, arm in arm. How could you do this to me?" Jake asked angrily.

Jenna rolled her eyes. "Last week, huh. Hannah is accusing me of cheating last week, and she waited until an hour before the wedding. Unbelievable. Look, I know I mentioned this to you. My cousin Paul, my gay cousin Paul, had just told me that his long-time boyfriend had just accepted his proposal. So, I naturally congratulated him. Yes, I kissed him. On the cheek. Didn't your mother mention that factoid, or did it slip her mind?" Jenna asked sarcastically.

"Your cousin?"

"Yes. My cousin. You see, this is just your mother trying to create drama," Jenna said, moving to hug him.

"It doesn't matter," Jake said, lifting his hands to fend her off. "Mother says it's just a matter of time."

Jenna took a deep breath. "We talked about this. Your mother doesn't want to let you go. You were doing so well recognizing her manipulation. You were going to therapy. What happened?" Jenna asked softly.

Jake shook his head. "I stopped therapy. Mother said only the weak-willed go to therapy."

"Only the weak-willed? Of course, Hannah wants you to stop therapy. It interferes with her manipulation. Jake...."

"I... I can't do this. I need to think. I'm going to go..."

"You're not going to listen to me, are you? So, you want to go? Go where?" Jenna asked quietly, realizing trying to stop Jake from ruining the wedding was futile.

"I think ... I think I'm going to use the reservations we made for our honeymoon. I mean, it's all paid for and non-refundable, so why waste it. Right?" Jake asked, looking for Jenna to acknowledge this was the correct decision.

"I see. You're going to go alone on what would have been OUR honeymoon?" Jenna asked, raising her voice. "Alone? To Italy. So you can think? You don't even speak the language? How do you think you're going to find anything?"

"Oh! No. It'll be fine. Mother will be there, and she's been taking Italian lessons since she found out that's where we were going," Jake replied with a smile.

"Your mother? You're taking your mother? Wait, why was she taking language lessons? Please don't tell me she was going to just show up?" Jenna said with increasing force.

"Of course. She's my mother. I would never go abroad without taking her," Jake replied as though this were a normal circumstance.

"Your mother has reservations to join us on our honeymoon?" Jenna asked in disbelief.

"Of course."

"And when were you going to tell me?" Jenna asked with false sweetness.

Jake was finally realizing there might be a problem. "Are you upset? Why are you upset? It would've been a great time for you and Mother to bond. Anyway, it's not going to happen now."

"No, it's not going to happen now," Jenna agreed in a cold voice.

"Good. I'm glad you understand. Please apologize to everyone," Jake said before leaving the suite.

Jenna stared at the closed door. "He's going on his honeymoon with his mother," she said softly. "HE'S GOING ON HIS HONEYMOON WITH HIS MOTHER," she screamed, collapsing to the floor.

"Jenna. Don't cry. He's not worth it," Beth said, patting her back.

Jenna lifted her head. "I'm not crying. I'll cry later. I'll cry that I wasted years of my life on that wretched mama's boy. Right now, I'm furious that he's leaving to clean up his mess. He doesn't even have the guts to face our guests."

"What are you going to tell them?" Beth asked.

Jenna's smile was terrifying in its implication of pain to be administered. She turned to the stunned videographer. "Can you edit on the fly?"

"What do you need?" the woman asked.

"Just the part since Jake walked in," Jenna replied. She smiled when the woman smiled back.

"What are you going to do?" Beth asked. "Something evil, I hope."

Jenna laughed. "Oh yeah." She asked Beth to contact the groomsmen to see if they knew anything about this. They didn't and were appalled by the turn of events. Jenna instructed the wedding party to go down to the reception area and update the venue manager. This was going to be a party, not a wedding reception.

Jenna dressed in jeans and headed to the chapel with the videographer. They stopped at the AV room.

"Go," the woman instructed. "I know what you want to do. I'll wait until you say the word."

Jenna nodded and left. When she reached the chapel doors, she took a deep breath. *Showtime*. She opened the doors and walked confidently down the aisle. The assembled guests watched in confusion. The room soon buzzed with whispers. Jenna reached the altar and turned. She smiled and nodded. "I'm sure most of you have figured out there won't be a ceremony today, well, at least not between Jake and myself. I'd like you to hear the reason why in his own words." Jenna signalled, and Jake and Jenna's conversation filled the church.

"So. That's that," she said when the recording stopped. You could've heard a pin drop. Jenna smiled before anyone could express their sympathy: "I'd like you all to join me for the party being held in an hour."

"Party?"

"Oh yes. I'm going to celebrate the fact that I narrowly escaped being married to a mama's boy with an Oedipus complex. I'm going to sing, dance, eat and drink." Jenna motioned to her attire. "I'm going to go get dressed in something more appropriate, something that will match your finery."

There were a few chuckles, which reassured Jenna.

"Are you sure?" a co-worker asked worriedly.

"Jake just ruined his life. He's not going to ruin mine. It's a celebratory party; the focus has just changed," Jenna answered.

"From love to...?"

"Self-actualization. There are a lot of things I want to do, and now ... I can. I can make my dreams come true. I guess that's selfish, but I want to be selfish for a while," Jenna admitted.

"So now we party."

"So now, we party hard to celebrate my mid-life crisis in my mid-twenties," Jenna laughed. "All right. I'll see you downstairs."

When Jenna returned to the suite, her friends had put away all the bridal paraphernalia, including her wedding gown. It had been her mother's. She sat down and let herself mourn for what should have been.

"Oh no, you don't. You've been doing good so far. You don't get to break down over that ... that ..." Beth couldn't find the right word to describe Jake.

Jenna smiled wanly, "I just wanted a few minutes to myself. I tell myself I should've seen it coming. There were red flags. Hannah didn't want to let go of her son. But this ... oh my god."

"You couldn't have seen it coming. Hannah is a force to be reckoned with, but we all believed she wanted Jake's happiness," Beth said, shaking her head. "Apparently not."

"Apparently not," Jenna agreed.

"Okay. Enough of this, time to get dressed."

"You're right. I'm glad I have the reception dress," Jenna stated. She'd been concerned that the heirloom dress might get soiled or damaged at the reception, so she purchased a dress that would change into after the prerequisite wedding pictures.

"You were only concerned that Hannah might try to pour red wine on your dress. This stunt of hers is beyond anything we might have believed," Beth stated.

"I know. That's why I specifically told the venue, no red wine on the premises," Jenna said.

"Well, we don't have to worry about accidental spillage. So, let's get you ready for the party," Beth said, holding up a garment bag.

Jenna smiled as she put on the royal blue dress. It was a floor-length gown with three-quarters sleeves. The dress had a sweetheart neckline, rushing around the torso and a slit that went up to mid-thigh.

Jenna was surprised when she turned and saw herself in the mirror. "Wow. I look really good. Sexy but demure. This looks even better than when I bought it?"

"Here are the shoes, and we're good to go," Beth said.

"You're the best friend a woman could ever have. Thank you," Jenna said, hugging her friend.

"Stop that. We paid a lot of money for the makeup, and crying would only ruin it."

Jenna smiled and settled her shoulders. "Let's do this."