
Chapter 1

Michael stepped off the elevator into the plush offices on the executive floor of Fitzgerald Foods, the company his grandfather had built from the ground up. He wore wealth like most individuals wore a pair of jeans—with absolute ease and familiarity. He was comfortable with his privilege now, at thirty-six, when he hadn't always been growing up. But Michael had been raised in a world of wealth and privilege few ever achieved or experienced. He knew how fortunate he was, but at the same time he bore a mantle of responsibility most people could never comprehend. This company and all of those he owned had thousands of employees who depended upon him to make the right decision for all involved. One wrong move on his part and his people, the people the company depended on to make everything run seamlessly, from the factory workers to the office personnel and distribution channels, suffered.

That was one thing his father had made sure Michael understood. He wasn't the company. He was only its guide and navigator. The company ran because of everyone involved, from the Board members on down to the janitor. He believed in an honest

day's work, in ensuring that those who worked for Fitzgerald Foods—one of the subsidiaries of Ragnall Sugar started by his great-great-grandfather more than a century ago, or his Hollywood production company Conmar, or real estate firm Fitzgerald-Logan Realty—were well compensated for their efforts.

For this morning's board meeting, he'd chosen a tailored suit in a crisp dark gray that made his indigo eyes stand out and bespoke of that wealth. He was comfortable wearing the platinum Rolex on his left wrist and the black Italian leather shoes had been hand crafted for his feet the last time he'd been in Italy, along with the Cavalli silk tie adorning his neck in vermilion with a diamond shaped pattern.

His dark golden hair, currently sporting lighter blond streaks from his time away under the sun on Pleasure Island, reached his chin. The longer style was an affectation he had developed while attending university abroad in Europe more than a decade past. He'd drawn it back into a stubby ponytail and figured that, combined with his trim, close cropped beard, gave him a more down to earth appeal.

He didn't miss the sly looks from the receptionist and administrative assistants that stated quite clearly they found him attractive. Many of them would be only too happy to be called into his office for something other than work.

Michael appreciated women in all their varied flavors. He respected them. But he also hadn't been with a woman in the vanilla sense in fifteen years, and doubted that most of the women vying for his attention would satisfy him. Not to mention, he seriously doubted they realized that, when he did select a partner, it was with the intent to share her with his best friend, Dante.

His personal administrative assistant, Barbara Cruz, was at his side. Barbara had worked for Michael for five years now. She was his right hand, helping oversee the multiple business enterprises. An attractive woman at thirty-nine, with a husband and two kids, she was half a foot shorter than he, with golden tanned

skin and chocolate eyes, but with a mind like a whip, and the take no prisoners attitude the job required lest it spit them out.

“You have to limit the board meeting to an hour if you want to make it to lunch with Senator Conrad on time,” Barbara said as they walked down the regally decorated halls. The décor was comprised of hardwood floors, and walls in a deep navy, decorated with museum quality art.

Michael checked his watch. “Yes, I realize that. Dan didn’t mention why they were calling this impromptu board meeting.”

“Boss, if I knew, you would as well.”

They reached the end of the hall and the oak door entrance to the conference room. “I know. Check my schedule for the end of the week. I know Conmar wanted me in Los Angeles for the premiere. It’s one of Rachel’s pet projects, and you know how my sister can be. But see if it actually requires my presence or if it’s something I can skip out on. If I’m needed, make sure my suite at the Beverly Wilshire is reserved, and call Logan to make sure he and Chet are available to pilot the Lear.”

“Will do. I’ll get that done in my office while you’re in there with the old biddies.”

“Thanks, B.” With a smile at the use of the board’s nickname, he nodded and shoved the door open.

Inside, seated on black leather seats at the glossy, long mahogany table were the seven independent directors of the board. Their faces turned toward Michael as he entered and headed to the head of the table.

“Either I’m late, or every one of you is early. I have a packed schedule today, folks; when is the rest of the board going to be in?” he asked, taking a seat at the head of the table as usual and withdrawing his board file from his briefcase.

“They won’t be joining us today. This is about something of a more personal nature that we need to address,” Dan Vander-smoot replied. Dan owned a small, local fast food chain that

served up Cajun offerings. The man in his forties was a social climber who Michael had heard had political aspirations.

“And what thing of a personal nature do we need to discuss? I rescheduled a morning meeting with Senator Conrad to attend this impromptu meeting, so it had better be important.” Michael shot Dan a steely glare before glancing at the rest of the members present.

“Michael, what we’ve learned is disturbing. As a public company, the way our board members act in public reflects on all of us,” Carla Lowell said. She was wearing a red power-suit, her shoulder-length blonde hair expertly styled.

Michael leaned back in his chair and assessed the room, taken aback at the undercurrent of hostility being directed his way. “Would you like to expand on that?”

Robert Huntington, who had been on the board when Michael’s father was alive, and whose hair was more silver now than brown, sighed. “No one is accusing you, Michael. I’ve known you your entire life. Served on the board with your father. But the allegations against you are rather damning.”

“And what allegations are they?” Michael shot a sharp, arched look around the room, studying each of the seven board members. All of them but one wore a look of disappointment and concern.

Dan Vandersmoot couldn’t keep the light of victory from his eyes. “Your sexual exploits, should they become public—”

“Excuse me? When did whom I sleep with or not become a matter of contention?” Michael hoped that the steel he was injecting in his gaze belied the unease that curdled his stomach, and turned the coffee he’d imbibed on his way to the meeting into acid.

“When you’re engaging in acts unbecoming of the CEO and Chairman of Fitzgerald Foods, then it becomes all of our business,” James Cabot explained. James owned the New Orleans

professional rugby team, The Thunderbolts, which Michael's buddy Hudson played on.

"And what acts are you talking about?" Michael was careful with whom he and Dante fucked. He had background checks conducted before they engaged a submissive because of the secrecy required. The submissives both at Underworld and at Pleasure Island, a private island they liked to frequent that catered to the lifestyle in the Bahamas, were thoroughly vetted. Yes, he liked topping a bound submissive with Dante, but that was information that only those in the scene knew. Other than at Club Underworld, which was under Dante's name on purpose, and their getaways to Pleasure Island, he did not parade his lifestyle choices around for the world at large.

"It has come to our attention through a source who shall remain anonymous for their protection, that you like to engage in seedy, perverted sexual acts with more than one partner at a time," Katherine Harding, the youngest on the board, explained, "which, if true, calls into question your position on the board as a publicly traded company."

"And if it's proven, we would be forced to remove you as chairman, and potentially as CEO," Victoria chimed in. She was the head of media operations for a large southern conglomerate, and razor sharp. If she was concerned about the information they had received, Michael couldn't discount it.

Brad Coldwell, the CFO of Fitzgerald-Logan Realty, added, with a pensive, concerned expression on his face, "Now, we plan on conducting a discreet investigation over the next thirty days. If these claims are true, we will be forced to take action at that time." Michael could tell that the matter troubled the longtime associate of the realty company. His salt and pepper hair looked like he had been running a frustrated hand through it all morning.

"I can promise you those claims aren't true. In fact, I will be announcing my engagement shortly," Michael lied through his

teeth, and kept his face stone cold as he surveyed his board. He wondered which one of them was the culprit behind the claims. At this time, they were all suspect. And he hated that because, until this meeting, he had considered the people in this room to be individuals he trusted—otherwise they wouldn't be on the board. It was true he didn't care much for Dan personally, but he knew the work Dan did for his company, and that he was at the top of his game.

“Oh, really? I hadn't heard you were dating anyone,” Dan stated with a hard gleam.

The man always had been a sanctimonious asshole. Once Michael got past this blip, he would see about replacing the ingrate. Keeping his tone smooth as butter yet with an edge of steel behind it, Michael said, “That's because she is no one you know, Dan. We've kept our relationship low key and out of the press.”

“Well, that's wonderful news,” Robert said, with relief covering his expression, “And if that's the case, we can put this nasty business behind us.”

“And who, might I ask, is she?” Dan asked with a tick in his jaw.

The fucking bastard was trying to shove Michael out of his own company. The company his grandfather and father had built. Fucking prick. “Look for the announcement in the papers next week.”

Every board member but Dan seemed to relax at Michael's proclamation. But Dan was like a dog with a damn bone that didn't belong to him.

“Be that as it may, these charges still must be investigated. I vote that we reassess in thirty days,” Dan spoke to the group, ignoring Michael entirely.

“I second that,” Victoria stated with a tilt of her head, making her curly ginger hair bounce and sway over her slim shoulder.

There was no getting out of this. Michael's life was going to be examined under a microscope for the next thirty days.

He had the distinct urge to head back to his gym and pummel the punching bag until it was nothing but a pile of dust.

"Fine. Now, unless we have other business to discuss, as I mentioned before, I have a packed schedule today," Michael replied stonily, not allowing the group to witness the disquiet roiling through him—not when there was a vulture among them waiting for the perfect moment to strike and rip him to shreds.

"That should be all for now," James stated, closing his file.

"Great." Michael rose, grabbed his briefcase, and nodded. "You may contact my assistant to schedule the review."

He left the conference room. They had an intruder at Club Underworld. It was the only explanation that made sense. Michael was uber careful; they all were. They had non-disclosure agreements for members for a reason. He didn't stop at Barbara's office. Instead, he direct messaged her, telling her that something had come up and he needed her to cancel the rest of his appointments for today. And to give his regards to the Senator.

In his car—today he'd chosen to drive his black Bentley—he called Dante.

"Yo, what's up?" Dante answered.

"We have a major fucking problem. Email the founders. Emergency meeting as soon as everyone can make it to the penthouse."

"What the hell? I thought you had a board meeting."

"I did. Someone knows about us, about our activities at the club, and is leaking that information to members of the board to get me not only removed from the board, but as CEO of my own fucking company."

"Son of a bitch. I'm on it. When can you get here?" Dante asked him.

Michael switched lanes on the freeway, heading toward the exit for interstate ten from the six-ten. "I'm on my way now.

Barbara is cancelling my appointments for the day. Oh, and Dante, we need to find me a fake fiancée on the double—one who will agree to a non-disclosure agreement. Start combing through the single submissives at Underworld looking at whom we might be able to vet.”

“Jesus Fucking Christ. It would be easier for me to resurrect Marie Laveau. No offense to the subs, but none of them will be on the level that you would need to convince the board.”

“I already mentioned it was someone they wouldn’t know, hopefully indicating they aren’t of the same class. Be there shortly. We can talk more about it then.” Michael hung up. Fury had him punching the gas. Dan was behind it, he had to be. Michael knew the son of a bitch was a climber, but he had never expected this type of subterfuge. That Dan would convince a member of Michael’s inner sanctum to collect dirt on his lifestyle.

Michael would discover who was behind the betrayal, and crush the motherfucker.