

## Chapter One

*He has a nasty temper.*

Those haunting words from Oscar Bledsoe's former girlfriend stuck in her mind as thirty-two-year-old Jenna McCray followed the hostess to a table, absently nodding to familiar faces in the upscale restaurant.

Hindsight being twenty-twenty, she should have canceled their date on Friday. However, it was an important charity event she felt obligated to attend, and she had already added Oscar as her plus-one.

The disaster that followed was a hard lesson learned.

Asking him to meet for drinks tonight to break things off might not be the best idea, either, but what's done is done.

Once seated, she ordered a glass of wine and fidgeted until it arrived, taking an unladylike gulp of liquid courage. The mere thought of seeing him again upped her anxiety level.

She tensed when a man approached the maître d' podium but relaxed when she realized it wasn't Oscar—then did a double-take when he passed. *Holy mother of pearl. Was she still breathing?*

He did not turn heads on looks alone, though he was movie star handsome. In fact, he brought to mind an actor she'd seen in a movie last week, Chris Hemsworth, with that chiseled jaw, and full, unsmiling lips that firmed ever so slightly as he passed. Dressed casually in a dark sports coat and slacks, he exuded a slow-burn intensity that stalled her wineglass midair. Maybe it was the confident stride as he passed or the striking blue eyes that brushed hers in passing—then lingered after he sat down—that made her breath hitch and her nerve endings hum.

Whatever it was, it briefly replaced the knot in her stomach with an unexpected surge of awareness. *Sheesh, girl. Get a grip. You just waded back into the dating pool—and he's way out of your league.*

The wine glass in her hand trembled as she swallowed an unladylike gulp. *I can do this. I can do this.*

She'd met Oscar last year at a business dinner she attended with her soon-to-be ex-husband, Jack. Oscar must have noticed the tension between them as he endeavored to keep her entertained while Jack made the rounds. At the time, she was grateful for the distraction.

A few months after their divorce was final, Jack perished in a car accident, and she buried herself in work until last month, when she attended another event and met Oscar again.

A successful businessman and CEO of his own company, he was attractive, with salt-and-pepper hair, a charming smile, and a pleasant conversationalist. When he asked her out the next week, she accepted.

Their first date was pleasant enough. The fact that he seemed more interested in discussing Jack's business dealings than getting to know her was a red flag she should have paid heed to. On the second, he angrily berated a waiter because the wine recommendation wasn't satisfactory and remained surly the entire evening.

That experience convinced her that nothing positive would come of a relationship, so she planned to end things after the dinner last week.

What a disaster.

When they met in the lobby, he immediately found fault with her attire and complained because there wasn't time to go home and change. The appearance of one of Oscar's business associates saved her from making a scene by walking out. The two men engaged in an animated

conversation in the corner, while she stood there, arms crossed, waiting. When he returned, Oscar was agitated and distracted. However, his mood abruptly changed as they rose to leave, and he proclaimed things would improve once they got upstairs to the suite he had booked.

Stunned by his boldness, it took a moment for her to refuse, adding that they hardly knew each other.

When he grabbed her arm, she jerked free, told him not to call her again, and left.

Unsettled by the troubling memory, Jenna took a calming breath and fingered the velvet box on the table that arrived by courier earlier today. Apparently, Oscar hadn't taken her rejection to heart. Maybe a public place would prevent an unpleasant display when she returned the gift and told him not to call again.

Gooseflesh prickled her arms. She glanced around and found the blue-eyed man staring at her. His gaze, warm and gentle as a caress on her skin, made her heart race and air swoosh from her lungs. In a flash, it disappeared, and he looked away.

Dazed and confused, she blinked rapidly, trying to reconcile the mixed signals just as Oscar strolled toward the table.

"I'm glad you finally came to your senses," he said smugly and sat down. He snapped his fingers toward a passing server. "Champagne."

The waiter glanced at Jenna's wine glass.

"None for me, thanks. I prefer my wine."

Oscar's lips flattened into a straight line, and he rudely waved the young man away. "I don't like that dress. You should have worn something else."

She gripped the fragile stem of the glass. "I happen to like it."

His right index finger rapped lightly on the table. "Well, I don't, so don't wear it again."

Jaw tight, she squared her shoulders. “And I don’t like being told what to wear,” she snipped. “What to do or how to do it.”

One hand fisted on the table as Oscar’s eyes flashed white-hot anger.

Despite the fear making her chest tight, Jenna kept her voice calm. “I asked you here so we could talk like mature adults. I see now that was a mistake.” She pushed the box toward him. “I can’t accept this,” she said firmly. “I thought I made myself clear last week. Please don’t call me again.”

His breath came in two quick gasps. He tensed, and his nostrils flared as he glared at the box and then her. “You disappoint me, Jenna.”

Her pulse skipped. “Please do not call me again.” Her firm voice revealed nothing of the turmoil inside.

Several silent heartbeats passed before his expression changed to something cold and sinister, and he slowly stood, slipping the box into his coat pocket. He gave the crowded restaurant a disdainful glance. “I can’t say I’m surprised, though,” he sneered loud enough for others to hear. “You aren’t up to my usual standards.”

The insult made her flinch, but she didn’t reply or make eye contact with any of the restaurant’s patrons, many of whom she knew. *Oh God. Someone will tell Dad before I get a chance to.* She quickly quashed that train of thought—one crisis at a time.

A thick, dark vein marred his forehead, and his thin lips curled into a snarl as he pulled something from his pocket. “A little something to remember me by.” His gift slid across the table toward the wine glass in her hand.

Panic rose from the depths of her soul at volcanic speed, reducing her breath to rapid gasps. Black spots danced in her vision, and the need to flee exploded.

But she couldn't move.

The rational part of her brain recognized it was a fake, albeit a realistic one. But that part was no match for the area that saw a giant black spider with evil green eyes blinking in time to her racing heart.

In full-on panic mode, she shrieked and jumped up, toppling her chair and stumbling into someone behind her, who then collided with a waiter carrying a water pitcher, sending all three to the floor in a shower of ice-cold water.

She landed partially on top of the man she crashed into, his arms around her waist as he withstood the worst of the fall. Another scream lodged in her throat when she spotted the monster resting on her thigh.

Suddenly, his hand moved, and the spider vanished.

“You’re okay,” murmured a husky voice against her ear. “It’s gone. You’re okay.”

Laughter filtered through a fog of humiliation when reality set in. She’d freaked out—in a public place and lay on the floor atop a total stranger while Oscar did nothing but watch, a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

“Something wrong with my gift, Jenna?” he crooned.

“I t-t-told you I h-hate spiders.” Her whole body trembled, and she couldn’t control the quiver in her voice.

The man’s arms tightened slightly, and she breathed easier.

“Did you?” cooed Oscar. “I must have forgotten.”

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Thomas Donovan couldn't believe his eyes. Jenna McCray. Widow of Jack McCray, only daughter of Walter Abernathy, and queen of the DFW society pages, didn't look so hoity-toity right now.

She'd dominated his thoughts from the first moment he saw her picture in the paper, taken at some high-brow event two weeks ago. He couldn't get the image out of his mind. Hell, he'd even cut the damn thing out and kept it in his desk drawer. How pathetic was that? Silently labeling her *The Ice Queen* hadn't helped at all.

Seeing her in person tonight, all prim and proper, like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, the label jumped out at him, even as his crazy heart raced like a runaway train.

Everything from her regal posture to how she sipped the wine screamed *money* and *class*. Coffee-colored hair pulled into a tight bun at the nape, and pearl studs in her ears emphasized the delicate bone structure of her face and the fullness of ruby-colored lips. The basic black dress and single strand of pearls would look simple on most women. On her, it was elegant.

When their gazes locked briefly, the jolt of desire was so potent it shocked him.

The returning look of interest stole his breath.

Every unexplained feeling he'd endured for the last two weeks swamped him like a tidal wave. It took massive effort to walk calmly to his table. *What the hell? She's so out of my league it's not even funny.*

Oscar's joining her was an unpleasant shock. The man was as dirty as mud. Why on earth would someone with her obvious class associate with someone like him?

Thoughts in turmoil, he decided to skip dinner and leave—until all hell broke loose.

He'd never met anyone with arachnophobia, but judging by her reaction to a fake spider, she suffered an extreme case. As snickers from the other patrons registered, his protective instincts surged.

A shudder rolled through her body, and she sucked in a jerky breath, mumbling something he didn't catch, when he quickly hid the spider from view.

"It's gone," he whispered. "You're okay."

When she attempted to stand, he stopped her. "Wait." Then he maneuvered to assist her, one hand remaining on her arm for stability.

"I'm so sorry," she muttered, avoiding eye contact and swiping at the water on her dress. "I'll pay to have your clothes cleaned."

When she looked at the mess a waiter quietly cleaned up, he noticed the bright color on her cheeks, which elicited a wave of sympathy.

"Oh, Alfred," she asked. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Miss McCray." He nodded toward Oscar's retreating figure. "And he's to blame—not you."

Donovan lightly squeezed her arm. "Ma'am? Are you okay?"

Face scarlet, she managed a shaky "I'm fine," then swallowed. "Th-thank you. For helping me."

Donovan clenched his teeth as his fantasy dreams went up in smoke. She couldn't even look him in the eye when she mumbled insincere words of gratitude.

*Class and trash don't mix.*

"Anytime."

At his terse response, dark, earnest eyes, filled with confusion and something he couldn't readily identify, whipped to his. Desire coursed through him again, heady as strong whiskey, leaving him slightly off-balance.

Frowning, she retrieved a wallet from the bag on the table, pulled out a card and some bills, then passed the money to the waiter. "If this isn't sufficient for my wine and the pitcher, Alfred, please let me know."

He hesitated, then took the money. "It's fine, Miss McCray."

A harried woman suddenly appeared from Donovan's left. The manager—they'd met on a previous visit, but for the life of him, he couldn't recall her name.

"Oh my God, Jenna. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Katie. Embarrassed but unhurt." She tilted her head toward Donovan. "This gentleman broke my fall." She nibbled her lower lip as though unsure of what to do next. Inhaling, she passed him the card. "Thank you, Mr..."

"Donovan."

"Mr. Donovan. Please—"

"No mister. Just Donovan."

Lips parted slightly, she hesitated. "Oh. Okay. Donovan. Please send me a bill for the dry cleaning."

"That's not necessary."

"Yes. It is."

Cheeks the brightest red he'd ever seen, her earnest expression softened.

"Please."

That one word curbed his resentment. He reached for the card, ignoring the tingle as their fingers brushed.

“Donovan,” said Katie. “Thank you for helping my friend.”

“No problem, ma’am.”

“And dinners on me tonight.”

“Actually, I was just leaving.”

She looked around. “Was something wrong with your table?”

He shook his head. “Unexpected change in plans. I was on my way out when—this happened.”

“Then please accept a raincheck for next time.”

He nodded, knowing he would never accept the offer.

He didn’t take charity. No matter how kindly extended.

Katie reached over and rubbed Jenna’s shoulder. “I guess kicking him to the curb in a public place wasn’t such a good idea after all, huh?”

Donovan barely covered his surprise. *So that’s what happened—good for her.*

Jenna’s gaze shot toward him, then back to her friend. “No. It wasn’t.”

“I’ve never seen you react that way to a spider before.”

Her gaze flicked to Donovan, then back to Katie. “I—it just surprised me. That’s all.”

Donovan immediately recognized the lie. She wasn’t surprised. She was terrified.

“I made the mistake of saying they bothered me.”

*And that’s the understatement of the century.*

“And you’d already told him to back off,” added Katie, “so the creep had a Plan B to get even. I’m just happy you weren’t hurt.”

This time, when she looked at Donovan, her gaze held, and the intensity floored him. A dark chocolate brown enhanced by a golden ring around the edges, they glistened in the restaurant's ambient lighting.

Or was it unshed tears?

"I...have Donovan to thank for that." The deep flush on her face extended down a graceful neck to the modest neckline of her dress as she kept her gaze on him, sending blood rushing through his veins like class five rapids.

He nodded but didn't reply because, well, this time, her gratitude sounded sincere.

Spine straight, she inhaled as though fortifying herself and casually picked up her wine glass. Lifting it toward Donovan in a silent toast, she downed the contents, plucked her purse from the table, and tucked it under one arm. "Are we still on for Tuesday, Katie?"

"Of course."

"I'll see you then." With a slight incline of her head toward him, she walked out of the restaurant.

Spellbound, Donovan couldn't look away.

In one graceful move, she silently said '-screw you-' to a roomful of people and regally strolled out, ignoring the whispers and snickers following behind.

Ice Queen or not, she possessed grace, dignity, and unmistakable class. Traits Donovan admired and loathed at the same time.

*Class and trash don't mix.*

He found that out the hard way a long time ago.