

The Club

Mandasue Heller

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

‘Damn it!’ Jenna cursed, peering down at the ladder zigzagging its way over her knee. Less than an hour to go, her hair was still wet, she hadn’t even started on her make-up, and now she had to find another pair of tights. But it was her own fault. She should never have chanced a bath when she was so tired. Not on an important night like tonight.

She’d stressed and fretted her way through every second of the last few months, petrified that she’d bitten off more than she could chew; terrified that it would all fall apart at the last minute. Now that everything that could be done *had* been done, she should have been able to relax. But she felt worse than ever, and wished that she could run away and hide until it was all over. Still, it was too late for that. She just had to lay the fears aside and get on with it.

Taking several deep breaths to calm herself, Jenna sat down on the dressing-table stool and

dried her hair. That done, she carefully applied her make-up, then changed the laddered tights for a pair of sheer black lace-top stockings and slipped her shoes on.

Looking herself over when she'd finished, she smiled. Not bad, but she could do with spending a week or two in the gym to tone her stomach after all the fast food she'd been eating lately. And a few early nights wouldn't go amiss to lighten the shadows circling her eyes. But she'd do for now.

Her mobile rang just as she reached for her jacket. Seeing the name on the screen, Jenna smiled again.

Kalli was one of the young waitresses who had worked for her dad – and was the first to agree to come back when Fabian contacted the staff to let them know the score. A petite scrap-of-nothing Chinese girl, she was the prettiest little thing, with an elfin face and warm, almond-shaped eyes. She looked twelve, despite being almost twenty-one, but she had the air of a much older soul because she fussed over everyone like a mother hen. Particularly her flatmate, Austin, who was one of the waiters. And, as soon as she met her, Jenna.

Knowing that Kalli was probably checking up on her now to make sure that she hadn't run away, Jenna answered the call.

'Yes, I know I'm late, Kalli. I'm just leaving.'

‘Just thought I’d best check in case you’d fallen asleep in the bath, or something,’ Kalli said concernedly.

‘Who’s got time for a bath?’ Jenna lied, reaching for her keys and heading for the door. ‘Everything okay down there?’

‘Fine – *now*,’ Kalli told her. ‘Maurice had a bit of a crisis earlier, but it was nothing I couldn’t have sorted out in a nanosecond – if he’d bothered *asking*.’

‘Oh?’ Frowning, Jenna locked up and set off down the stairs. ‘What happened?’

‘He thought someone had stolen the champagne, and made all the boys leave what they were doing to search for it. I didn’t know what they were looking for, or I could have told them it had been moved to the office for safe keeping. But you know Maurice. He’d rather *die* than ask a *girl* for help.’

Tutting softly, Jenna let herself into the residents’ car park. Maurice was the head barman. He’d been with her dad right from the start, and still regarded him as the *proper* boss. He had a problem with females in general, but he particularly resented having one for a boss and had spent the last couple of days sulking and complaining while everyone else got on with the final preparations for the party.

‘Fabian gave him a bit of a roasting,’ Kalli went

on, chuckling softly now. 'That did *not* impress him, as you can imagine. But he wouldn't dare argue when Fabian's in that kind of mood.'

Sighing, Jenna climbed into her car. So, not only was Maurice still sulking, but Fabian was in a mood. Great! Just what she needed when teamwork was crucial to the success of the night.

Changing the subject before the nerves flared up again, she said, 'How's the queue?'

'Massive!' Kalli told her excitedly. 'And some have been waiting a good couple of hours already, so Fabian's got the security on alert in case anything kicks off when they don't all get in.'

'I'm sure we'll cope,' Jenna said, crossing her fingers. 'Anyway, I've got to get off the phone now, Kalli. See you in a bit.'

Disconnecting the call, she started the engine and eased the car out onto the road.

Turning onto Deansgate five minutes later, Jenna saw that Kalli had been right about the queue, which started at Zenith's brand new smoked-glass doors and snaked right down the block and out of sight around the corner.

It had been snowing all day, turning the roads to slush and the pavements to ice, and a fierce wind was punishing the skimpily dressed clubbers for their vanity.

The two doormen who were standing head and massive shoulders above the shivering crowd didn't seem fazed. But Jenna was sure they had to be freezing and, waving as she drove past, she made a mental note to see that they traded places with some of the other guys once everyone was inside.

Best leaving them out front for now, though, because they were easily the biggest of the security crew, and could most efficiently deal with trouble if Fabian was right and something *did* kick off.

Parking up behind the club, Jenna heard the staff talking among themselves in the main club-room as she let herself in through the kitchen door. Taking her coat off, she hung it on a hook in the staff cloakroom, then slipped quietly in behind the bar.

Standing in the shadows, she took the opportunity to have a look around before anybody noticed her. She'd had so many wobbles since committing herself to this, convincing herself that they would never be ready on time. But not only had the building, painting, and refurbishing work been completed ahead of schedule, it looked way better than she had ever imagined it would.

The funky chrome bars that she'd had installed were gleaming; the plush new carpets were spotless; and the mega-expensive opaque-glass circular

dance floor was alive with vibrant, colourful, built-in pulsar lights; while overhead, the new lighting rig rivalled that of any club Jenna had ever visited.

At Fabian's suggestion, they had turned the upper floor overlooking the dance floor into a VIP lounge, and a buffet of exotic foods had been laid out there earlier today for the invited guests, with a spectacular pyramid of sparkling glasses in the centre of it all for the champagne fountain. And little gift-packs containing expensive aftershaves and perfumes, and solid silver lighters engraved with the sword-slash 'Z' that Jenna had adopted as the new logo, had been placed on each table.

She'd been reluctant when Fabian had asked her to double the budget for the party, concerned that he was being unnecessarily extravagant on top of everything she'd already spent. But he'd persuaded her that they needed something special to impress the A-listers – in the hope that they would spread the word to their pals and really put Zenith on the celebrity map. And, all credit to him, she had to admit that he'd really pulled it off.

One of the waitresses spotted her just then and made her jump when she called, 'Wow, Miss Lorde! You look amazing!'

Embarrassed when the rest of the staff turned her way, Jenna fought the urge to turn and run. Most of them still secretly regarded her as the

boss's daughter, she knew, and if she was ever going to fill his shoes this was the time to do it.

Watching as Jenna came out from behind the bar, her thigh-length chain-mail dress shimmering like liquid silver, her hair gleaming, her eyes huge, Kalli thought that she was just the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

And she wasn't the only one.

Up in the DJ's booth, Vibes was holding one can of his headphones to his ear as he lined up his opening tracks. Glancing out of the window when he sensed the charge in the atmosphere below, he gave a low whistle when he saw Jenna. He'd thought she was pretty special from the first time he'd laid eyes on her, but, *man*, she looked hot tonight!

Flipping a button on the console, he pushed the faders up and flooded the air with the sweet sound of: '*Sexy . . . Everything about you, so sexy . . .*'

Blushing when the staff started laughing and clapping, Jenna held up her hands, saying, 'Okay, settle down . . . he's only testing the speakers.' Stepping back then, she said, 'Right, let's have a look at you all.'

Maurice was dapper in his self-chosen outfit of white shirt, black pants, and blue velvet waistcoat; the ten young waiters and waitresses looked gorgeous in their respective silver shorts and T-shirts and

minidresses that Jenna had designed for them; and the six-strong security crew exuded class and professionalism in their bow ties and muscle-enhancing black suits.

‘Perfect,’ she said approvingly.

‘Does that go for me, too?’

Coming down from the VIP area where he’d been doing last-minute checks, Fabian strolled towards her, handsome as a devil in a dark green suit, his hair falling lazily over his smoky eyes.

Glad to see that he was in a better mood than Kalli had reported, Jenna smiled. ‘Of course it does.’

‘Merci,’ he drawled, letting his gaze slow-dance over her. ‘And may I say that *you* look sensational.’

Flipping the mike on just then, Vibes’s smooth sexy voice came over the PA speakers. ‘Nearly time for the countdown, folks.’

‘Ready when you are,’ Jenna called, turning and waving at his silhouette in the booth. Crossing her fingers then, she turned back to the staff. ‘What say we get this party started?’

Gritting his teeth when the grandfather clock chimed twelve, Leonard Drake cursed under his breath. Damn Avril! They were supposed to be at the club already, and he’d been ready and waiting for a good half-hour while the driver sat in the car outside clocking up a nice bit of overtime. But

she was still at her vanity table, plastering yet more muck onto her jowls.

Well, he wasn't bloody well having it!

Pounding up the stairs, he burst into his wife's room and jabbed angrily at his watch.

'You *do* know what time it is, don't you? We're supposed to be there by now.'

Pausing with the lipstick halfway to her mouth, Avril flicked him a cool glance in the mirror. Then she slowly carried on with what she was doing.

'You are so infuriating sometimes,' Leonard complained. 'You know how much I've been looking forward to this. If you didn't want to come, you should have bloody well said so and I would have gone by myself!'

'No, you wouldn't,' Avril muttered, smacking her raspberry lips together. 'You never go *anywhere* new without me to hold your hand. I'm just a crutch, as far as you're concerned – an old pair of shoes that you slip on and walk all over.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' he retorted. 'James Lorde was a bloody good friend of mine, in case you'd forgotten, and I will *not* be late for his daughter's party!'

'You already are,' she reminded him flatly. 'And, for the record, dear, you and he were *not* good friends, you were acquaintances. There *is* a difference.'

‘He was my *friend*,’ Leonard asserted indignantly. ‘My *father*’s friend, and then *my* friend. If he weren’t, I wouldn’t have received a VIP invitation, would I?’

‘Temper, temper,’ Avril clucked as purple blotches sprang up all over her husband’s face. ‘Mustn’t get ourselves worked up. You know what it does to your complexion.’

Shaking his head with frustration, Leonard turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

Sighing when she heard the bathroom door slam shut down the landing a second later, Avril put the lipstick down and reached for her comb.

No doubt he’d gone to splash his face with cold water, but a blotchy complexion was the least of his worries. God only knew what he saw in the mirror these days, but he didn’t seem to have realised that he was no longer the slim, handsome young man he had once been. His lovely thick hair had thinned considerably, and his once-sparkly eyes were just piggy little blobs in their puffy sockets now. But it was the belly bulging over the waistband of his suit trousers that betrayed just how far he’d let himself go. And the jacket sleeves were surely constricting the blood flow to his arms, but the vain bugger had squeezed himself into it nonetheless.

Coming back just then, Leonard tutted when

he found Avril exactly where he'd left her. But knowing they would never get out of the door if he started a row, he mustered every last ounce of self-control and calmly said, 'Will you *please* hurry up?'

Without answering, Avril took a few more moments to tease her newly combed hair into shape. Then she gave it a quick spritz of lacquer before standing up.

'Thank you,' he muttered, heading for the door. 'I'll be in the car.'

Avril hissed a breath out through her teeth. She knew that she was being a bitch, but she couldn't help it. Theirs had not been the easiest of marriages, what with the demands of Leonard's political career pulling them this way and that. But she had hoped that things would mellow between them when he retired last year.

And he *had* adjusted quite well, seeming content to potter about in the garden, or shoot some holes – or whatever he called it – at the golf club. It helped that they were still invited to his ex-colleagues' dinner parties, giving him the opportunity to meet up with his cronies and keep abreast of the latest gossip while Avril and the wives swapped recipes. But just when she'd finally begun to believe that their future was settled, that damned invitation for the nightclub reopening party had

arrived, and he'd started acting like a kid who'd been handed the keys to the sweetshop.

'*AVRIIIIIII*!' Leonard screeched up the stairs now. 'Bloody well come *on*, will you!'

Rolling her eyes, Avril checked herself one last time in the mirror. Then she switched the lamp off and settled her mouth into an unconcerned smile before heading down the stairs.

The sooner this was over, the sooner she could get back to her book.

Across town, in his plush third-floor hotel suite, Tony Allen stopped his impatient pacing and yanked the curtain aside. In the car park below, his right-hand man, Eddie, was leaning against the white stretch limo they'd hired, chatting to the driver. When a sleek black Mercedes pulled in behind it, Tony watched the long-haired guy who was staying in the penthouse suite swagger towards it. He was dressed in tight leather pants and a girly-pink silk shirt, and was flanked by an uptight-looking older man and three blonde bimbos in micro-miniskirts. He was supposed to be some sort of megastar singer, according to Melody, but Tony couldn't say that he'd ever heard of him.

Chase Mann . . . What kind of homo name was that, anyway?

Dropping the curtain when the group had

climbed into the Merc and taken off, Tony glanced at his watch. Twelve-fifteen. What the fuck was Melody playing at? She always liked to be late to be sure of making a big entrance, but this was the one night of the year when you had to be there on the fucking dot! How many times did she need to brush her hair or take her make-up off only to put it back on exactly the same, anyway?

Marching into the bedroom, he snatched the blusher brush from Melody's hand and hauled her up off the stool.

'What are you *doing*?' she squawked. 'I'm not ready.'

'Yeah, you are,' he grunted, marching her into the living room. 'Here, you can finish off on the way.' Snatching her handbag off the table he shoved it into her hands, then pushed her out the door and down the corridor to the elevator.

Melody complained all the way down to the foyer. But Tony ignored her, possessing that rare quality other men would pay to acquire: the ability to completely blank his women out.

Even those as gorgeous as Melody Fisher.

And she *was* gorgeous: angel face, devil of a sexy body, waist-length honey-blonde hair, and the most perfect tits he'd ever got his hands on – all bought and paid for by him. At thirty-two, and five-ten, she was a good deal younger than him

and a little taller in her heels. But he was more than man enough to hold his own beside her, because he had that certain something about him: a menacing, brooding darkness, which, when added to his larger-than-life personality and the twinkle in his piercing eyes, created a powerful aura. *We'll have a laugh, but don't even think about fucking with me.*

'For Christ's sake, Tony!' Melody complained now, tottering helplessly on her stilettos as he pushed her out of the entrance doors. 'Do you have to act like such a fucking thug? You might get away with the He-Man shit in the fucking States, but we're in *England* now, remember?'

'Whatever,' Tony said dismissively, shoving her onto the limo's spacious back seat and climbing in beside her. Waiting until Eddie had got in up front, he tapped on the dividing window to tell the driver to get going.

Sighing loudly, Melody sat petulantly back, muttering, 'I can't *believe* you're stressing me out like this. Christ, I'm actually *trembling* – look . . .' Thrusting her hand out, she gave it an exaggerated shake. 'I need a cigarette,' she said then. Getting no response, she clicked her fingers sharply in front of Tony's face. 'A *smoke*, Tone, I need a smoke!'

'Not in the car,' he snapped, swatting her hand

aside. 'And don't call me that. You know I can't stand it.'

'Sorry, I'm sure!' Pulling her skirt down over her thighs with a huff, Melody folded her arms.

Reaching across, Tony pushed the skirt back up. 'Leave it there. I don't want people thinking I'm hanging out with a fucking nun.'

'No,' she sniped. 'You'd rather they thought I was a fucking *whore*.'

'Not just any whore,' he countered, giving her a sly grin. 'My whore. And don't you forget it.'

Melody complained all the way to the club, only stopping when they pulled up outside and she saw all the heads in the queue turn their way as people tried to see who was behind the blacked-out windows. Getting her first real buzz of the night, she fixed her top for maximum cleavage and manoeuvred her skirt to pussy level, then waited for the driver to open the door, eager to get out and bask in the admiring glances.

Tony was having none of it. He'd just spotted the paparazzi hanging about on the other side of the road, and the last thing he wanted was to wake up and find his picture splashed across the papers. Taking a firm grip on Melody's wrist when they hit the pavement, he raised an arm to shield his face from the barrage of flashing lights and yanked her to the head of the queue.

‘Tony!’ she griped, twisting to free herself as he paused to show the doormen their invitation.

‘You’re hurting me.’

‘So quit wriggling.’

‘These people wanted to see me. I am *famous*, you know. It kind of comes with the territory.’

Giving a scornful snort, Tony said, ‘Two films does *not* a superstar make.’

‘*Hollywood* films,’ she reminded him tartly.

‘You still ain’t no Jolie,’ he flipped back. ‘And I’d bet my life none of these idiots have got a fucking clue who you are.’

Not yet, maybe, Melody thought resentfully, folding her arms while they waited to be admitted. *But you just wait till my agent tells me I got that part I auditioned for. Angelina flaming Jolie won’t know what’s hit her when I get started!*