

# Chapter 1

*Jenni*

“Listen to me, Mark, rule 4.15.”

I jam my finger into the desk and slow my voice down, like a parent disciplining a child. “*Any* player charged with domestic violence is terminated. No, Mark! He punched his girlfriend in front of two hundred family and friends!” I hold the phone close to my mouth. “Bobby Johnson is no longer a Nashville General, understand?”

Profanities erupt from the other end of the phone. I yank it away from my ear and hang up, face burning with anger.

On his best days, Bobby Johnson's agent was a well-dressed, parasitic dickworm.

*He didn't care the poor girl suffered a fractured skull. He only cared that Bobby wasn't getting paid, which meant no deposits in his own bank account.*

I wad up a copy of Bobby's contract and throw it at the television, which shows ESPN's live coverage of Bobby's arraignment hearing. The ball of paper hits Bobby and bounces away. “And now we need a new starting quarterback.”

With a sigh, I stand up and walk to the open windows in my office. The General's practice field is bathed in the golden glow of late morning sunlight. A warm breeze fills my nose with the sweet scent of freshly cut grass. Up in the oak trees, the long, steady whistle of the mockingbirds lull me into a moment of workplace heaven.

Then Hell knocks sharply at my door.

“Come in,” I say as sweetly and professionally as I can.

The door to my office flies open and hits the wall with a loud bang. My business degree from Vanderbilt falls off its hook as two men walk in. Tank Carter, my interim boss and permanent pain in my ass, sits down with an expression of snarling frustration.

Behind Tank, team owner and billionaire William Bates finishes up a phone call, then walks in looking as guilty as a Southern debutante who'd just said a curse word.

"My apologies," William says, closing the door. "That was my granddaughter. She had her first golf lesson." He smiles at me proudly. "Teacher said she was a natural."

I smile back at William. Short and svelte, with salt and pepper hair cut close to his dark skin, he was the most charming, gentle billionaire I'd ever met. Working for William Bates was like working for family.

Tank clears his throat gruffly. "Let's get this going. I have a personnel meeting in fifteen minutes."

If William Bates was a batch of refreshing sweet tea, then Tank Carter was a mug of bitter black coffee with no room for any added sugar. His bald head and thick muscles leftover from his playing days didn't help soften him.

"Yes, of course," William says with a gentle smile. "My apologies."

"Alright," Tank grumbles. "What about Bobby? Tell me you found a loophole so we can keep him."

Looking out the window placidly, I slip a well-manicured nail between my teeth and brace for Tank's fury. "The player's union isn't fighting our decision. Everything's done."

Tank lets out a sound like steam escaping a pot. I bite down on my nail even harder, silently seething.

"Relax, Tank," William says, straightening up in his chair, the sweetness gone from his voice. "The Generals do not condone any abusive behavior. Jenni did what she was supposed to do."

From across my desk, I can feel Tank's stare trying to burn a hole in my head. It was my job to scout our players and make sure they followed the rules.

"Now we press on," William continues. "What's the plan?"

I glance at Tank, who keeps his eyes leveled directly at me. The breath catches in my throat, and I have to work hard to relax my chest.

Firing our starting quarterback wasn't the only reason Tank was pissed off at me.

A couple of weeks ago, I dared to ask for an interview for the vacant general manager position. Tank, and the rest of the sports world, assumed he would promote after our former general manager Hugh Lawson passed away. After all, Tank spent five years as the director of pro personnel, one rung below the general manager.

For the organization, Tank was the easy answer to a challenging problem.

But William, to his credit, had insisted on a thorough search and an open interview process.

Shortly after my interview, I caught the end of a conversation Tank had outside the locker room. "What the hell does she know," I heard him ask with a laugh. "There's a reason a woman's never been a general manager. You need balls for this job."

Last week, William had conducted a second interview with only myself and Tank. I'd tried to keep it a secret, but Tank found out. Since then, Tank had increased his snarling in my presence, acting as if I was something less than sub-human.

All because I lacked a penis.

"We have a workout this afternoon for a couple of free agents," I say quietly. "Hopefully, there's someone who will work."

It wasn't the first time someone questioned why I wanted to be in a football front office. The questions and comments were as predictable as the tides. It's a boys club, Jenni. Why put yourself through such crap?

No one will ever hire a woman to run a team.

It's a shame you have a vag Jenni because you know football.

I stop looking at William and Tank, focusing instead on my reflection in the window.

*I do know about football. The players, the people. I can run a team better than any of the boys.*

*Just watch me.*

I walk over to the desk with a deep breath and uncap a pen, ready to move on. As I sit, I feel Tank's eyes give the opening of my blouse more than a glance.

"Don't worry," Tank says dismissively. "I just want a backup. One of them will do." He leans back with a sigh, crossing his arms over his barreled chest. "This has suddenly become a lost year. Let's lose as many games as possible to get the top pick in next year's draft."

Tank looks over at William for confirmation of his plan. William studies him intently for a moment, the gears churning in his head. William was good at running businesses, but not at assessing football. His purchase of the team a decade ago was simply a satisfaction of a long-time childhood fantasy.

After a few tense seconds, William turns and gives me a concerned look. "Should we do that, Jenni?"

Since the second interview, William insisted on asking both of us about team decisions, as if our interview had never really ended.

I shift around in my chair, while Tank eyes me angrily. "Some of what Tank says makes sense. But I wouldn't do it, though."

"Why not," Tank blurts out.

William waits intently, eager to hear what I have to say.

"All the quarterbacks in the draft stink," I say, looking directly at William. "None of them will succeed at this level. We'd waste our time and our pick."

Tank scoffs and rolls his eyes.

"What's your plan Jenni," William asks patiently.

"We can trade-"

"That's ridiculous," Tank snaps, slapping his thighs in frustration. "We're getting bent over in the trade market right now! Denver wanted *two* first-rounders for their back up!"

I raise my voice, trying not to let Tank drown me out. "Maybe one of the free agents will work. We just need a game manager. We've got defense and a running game."

Tank stands up abruptly. "I can handle it, okay? You just process the paperwork, understand?"

His words were like a song stuck on repeat. Do your job. Blah, blah, blah. I picture him with a bottle and rattle, exactly like my mother had taught me, careful not to continue the argument.

"Understand completely," I say quietly.

"Good," Tank snaps. He heads for the door and slams it shut.

William sits there for a second and then purses his lips. "Well, he certainly is an asshole sometimes, don't you think?"

I look at him with wide eyes for a second and then burst out laughing. "Your words, not mine."

"Yes," William says with a sigh. "It's probably wise that you keep your opinions to yourself." He looks at his watch. "I don't know what Hugh ever saw when he hired him."

"Well, Tank does know the game," I say, smoothing my skirt over my knees. "Better than you and I ever will. Have to give him that, at least."

William flashes a smile. "That's a very diplomatic answer. I appreciate that."

I shrug my shoulders politely.

"Well," he says, clapping his hands together. "Can you watch these free agent workouts later?"

"Are you sure? I have several scouting meetings."

"Please," William says, standing up. "And just between you and me, I think you know more about football than some who played. I want your opinion on these free agents before Tank moves forward."

"I'll move my meetings around and be there."

"Excellent," he says, a smile lighting up his face. He turns and heads for the door. With a hand on the doorknob, he looks at me. "I'm very close to choosing our new general manager. It's my goal to hire someone before next week's season opener."

"That's good to hear," I say with a grin.

"See you soon, Jenni."

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A couple of hours later, I walk into the heavily air-conditioned indoor practice field with a stack of papers and a handful of pens with the Nashville logo on them.

Tank and the head coach, Gary Cable, stand at midfield, scanning the crowd and sipping from water bottles. Tank spots me and grimaces. I shrug my shoulders and flash a professional smile.

Across the field, I spot my assistant, Keesha, standing next to the locker room, holding a matching set of papers and pens. I walk over to her, and when she spots the papers in my hand, her face drops.

"Oh no," she says with a whine. "Did I mess up again? Am I not supposed to be here?"

Laughing, I shake my head. "No, these are for show. You're okay."

Keesha runs her fingers over the hundreds of small black ringlets of hair and blows out a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness." She flashes a bright, earnest smile. "I mean, you'd told me I was in charge of the forms." Keesha rubs her swollen stomach underneath her Nashville team polo. "Swear to God, pregnancy brain is a thing. It's ridiculous."

"You're just fine. William told me to be here."

Keesha grabs my arm, her eyes widening. "Did you get the job?"

I smile and lift the papers to my mouth, like any good coach would, and lower my voice. "No, but he's close."

"Ugh. I wish he'd give you the job already."

"Trying not to think about it too much," I say with an eye roll.

"I'll do it for you," Keesha says with a grin. "First female general manager of a professional football team. You would *literally* become history." Keesha nudges me. "I could write your Wikipedia page!"

Keesha's excitement makes me blush. I twist my heel around in the thick field turf, a grin spreading from one ear to the other.

Fine, so I thought about it. Like, a lot.

Build a team in my vision. Win a championship.

As a kid, while other girls played Barbie or pranced in pageants, I stood with my Dad on blistering hot practice fields, watching him point out every nuance of the game.

Building a team was in my blood.

"Okay," I mutter. "Enough. Let's focus."

Keesha stands up as straight as she can and nods. "You're right. I'm sorry." She stares intensely at the field until a smile cracks her serious veneer. "Okay, no, I can't. Oh my God, I'm so nervous for you!"

"That makes two of us."

"Three of us actually," Keesha says, rubbing her stomach. "This little girl is kicking away in there."

A broad smile spreads across my face. "A girl? You're having a girl?"

Keesha looks at me, confused. "Yeah, did I not text you yesterday?"

"No," I say, my voice rising in excitement.

"Damn it! I swear to God, I'm losing my mind."

Keesha reaches out, grabs my hand, and places it against her firm belly. "Say hello to Jenni Raven Foster."

I open my mouth, but an enormous swell of pride sweeps the words away. Instead, I stare at Keesha dumbly.

"That's right," Keesha says, suddenly embarrassed. "I'm naming my first girl after the woman I admire the most." Keesha takes a deep breath and looks at me. "You gave me a chance when I needed one. It's the least I can do."

"Thank you," I say quietly.

"It's the least I can do," Keesha says, grabbing her phone. "Now, are we going to start soon? I have to pee. *Again.*"

On cue, the locker room door opens. A trio of men jogs past us, each wearing a gold Nashville practice jersey, a black helmet, and black workout shorts. After they pass, I move in front of the door. As I'd explained to Keesha, you didn't bother players before a workout. However, after the workout, you didn't let them disappear until they've filled out the required paperwork.

I look over at Keesha, who stares intently at the quarterbacks as they stretch their tall, muscular bodies and warm up. "Your tongue's hanging out."

"Nothing wrong with a little look," Keesha says, a pen clenched in her teeth.

"Won't Jason be jealous," I joke.

Keesha looks over at me with a comforting smile. "Jason is the most amazing man in the world. I wouldn't be growing our kids if I didn't think so. But I can appreciate art when I see it."

"You can't see what's in the helmets, though."

Keesha arches an eyebrow. "Do you look at the statue of David for his face?"

I narrow my eyes in mock concern. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

"Mm-hmm."

A whistle blows on the field, signaling it was time to get to work. Tank walks to the sidelines, while Coach Cable starts to shout instructions.

Behind me, the locker room door bursts open. I turn in time to catch a gold Nashville jersey flood my vision and knock me to the ground. Arms flailing, I fall backward and hit my head on the turf. A sharp crack of pain splits my brain, and the world goes woozy. Keesha screams out next to me.

An arm slides under my back and lifts me to my feet as though I'm weightless. I open my eyes and see a group of people forming around me.

"I'm so sorry," says a concerned male voice. "Are you okay?"

I nod my head. "I think so."

"Are you sure? It looks like you're seeing double."

I squeeze my eyes shut and then open them, ready to apologize for standing in front of the door, but the words evaporate on my tongue.

A set of gorgeous brown eyes look at me with the utmost concern. My gaze flits around to the rest of his face, and it was just as impressive. Tanned. Angular. Short dark hair. But those eyes were nothing I'd ever seen before. Warm and smooth as melted chocolate. Intelligent. Ravishing.

"Seeing fine, thanks," I whisper.



He lets out a breath, and a smile spreads across his lips. "Okay, good. I just didn't expect anyone to be standing there. My bad."

His smile makes my heart skip a beat and sends a delicious shiver down my spine. I look at his bare, muscular arms for a reply, but the only things I can think of aren't about football.

Instead, I give his shoulder pads a pat and move quickly out of the way, trying to hide the flushing in my cheeks. "Good luck out there."

He gives me a confused laugh. "Thanks, I guess. Again, I'm sorry."

I take a deep breath and try to calm my nerves. Looking at the man's face directly was dangerous, like looking into the sun, so I stare at my heels instead. "Your tryout is starting. You should go."

"You're right." He takes a step towards the field and then stops. "For what it's worth, my name's Logan. Sorry for knocking you over."

Unsure of what to do, I salute him. Logan opens his mouth to say something but then shakes his head, puts on his helmet, and runs onto the field. As he shakes hands with his receivers and Coach Cable, Keesha slides up behind me.

"Oh my God," she whispers. "That man is *gor-geous* with a capital G."

I look around the field for Tank and spot him on the other sideline, yammering into a cell phone. Rubbing the spot where my head hit the turf, I sigh painfully. "I don't know what you are talking about."

Keesha chuckles. "Please, girl. He just melted you into a puddle of hormones."

Narrowing my eyes, I'm unable to produce a comeback. Instead, I just grab the sheet with the names of the free agents on it.

Logan Raines.

Delectable Logan Raines.

The shrill double tweet of the whistle distracts me. Showtime. Frustrated, I thrust the sheet back at Keesha. "Don't worry. He won't be a Nashville General. I'll make sure of that."