
Strictly Business

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ROSY glow of the bedside lamp left the corners of the room in shadow. Lacy ruffled curtains shut out the early winter darkness of the city below. Fat, fluffy pillows were piled high against the brass headboard of the big bed. A wicker basket full of dark red apples was balanced uncertainly on the peach-colored satin coverlet, next to a glossy fashion magazine. The clock on the bedside table noted discreetly that it was precisely ten minutes past two.

The young woman in the bed hadn't noticed the time. She was absorbed in the contents of the leather portfolio that lay open across her pajama-clad knees, which were drawn up under the satin coverlet.

"*Pink Champagne*," Gianna West said aloud, testing the sound against the emptiness of the room. She shook her head and tried the next phrase on the list. "*Velvet Rose*." She wrinkled her nose. "Blake, what on earth's the matter with you?" she asked the empty room. "We're supposed to be naming a new perfume here, not a cocktail lounge!"

There was no answer. She sighed. Blake was never around when she needed him, she thought owlishly. She scribbled a note to herself on the edge of the page, and went back to reading suggested titles for the new scent that Westway Cosmetics would be introducing soon. "*Never My Love*. No, that's too negative. *Dream of Yesterday*... Good heavens, we want to sell this perfume to women who have a future! *Captive Passion*—" She wadded up the list and threw it at the foot of the bed in disgust.

"What a bunch of idiotic names!" she muttered irritably. "Obviously I'm going to have to do it myself."

Well, tomorrow would do as well for that, she decided, patting back a yawn. She reached for another red apple from the basket and sliced it into quarters with the silver fruit knife that Blake had given her last Christmas. The apple split with a satisfyingly juicy crack, and Gianna bit deeply into a section and reached for the fashion magazine. Now for a little pleasant relaxation, she thought, after the cares of business.

Not that she really minded work, though. She flipped through the magazine pages, thinking about Westway. The company had been her preoccupation—almost an obsession—for the last five years, since she had rushed to finish her master's degree in

business administration so she could plunge into the company where her father had left off. Nobody had expected her to stay with it. They had all thought she was too young to know what she wanted. Especially Blake.

Blake had joined Westway before her. His father and hers had been the founding partners. It was funny, she thought, that everyone had assumed that Blake would come into the business, but no one had expected that Gianna would want to.

Blake hadn't hurried through school. Blake never exactly hurried at anything, Gianna thought, but he always seemed to finish ahead of schedule. And since he was a couple of years older than she, he had been installed in the main office of Westway while she was still in college. He had concentrated on learning the business at first hand, taking everything slowly and conservatively, observing every detail.

She thought sometimes that Blake Whittaker was still watching her thoughtfully, waiting for the day when she would give it up. Not that he was anxious to be rid of her, Gianna qualified hastily. No, she and Blake had a rare working relationship. Seldom did partners fit so well together, one's strengths filling in where the other was lacking, and never arguing over anything...

Well, almost never, Gianna thought with a grin, remembering a few times when the corporate structure of Westway had trembled under a quarrel. But usually, she and Blake were perfect partners – she overflowing with ideas, he the management genius who patiently fitted all the pieces together and made the innovations work.

Yes, she thought, *I'm a lucky woman, with the perfect job, and the perfect partner.*

Nothing else had ever captured Gianna's interest and devotion as the cosmetics industry had. Since she was a tiny girl, lipstick and perfume had been not dress-up playthings as they were to other little girls, but the stuff of life.

She had tried other fields. Her father had insisted, despite her temper tantrums, that she give other things a try, and so Gianna had worked at various jobs during summers and after school. She had been horribly jealous of Blake, who had spent his summers at Westway.

She supposed, looking back, that her father had been wise. By the time she had finally joined the family corporation, Gianna knew with absolute certainty that it was the only thing she ever wanted to do. She had spent the last five years making up for lost time.

She turned the page, and Meghan stared up at her from the four-color ad. Meghan, the model with the single name. Her face was quickly becoming the best-known in the world, with her true-green eyes, her black hair, the heart-shaped face with the perfect mouth, the classic nose.

“Now why couldn’t nature have given me that sort of looks?” Gianna asked herself. She tugged at a lock of hair that had fallen over her shoulder. It was brown—not chestnut, nor almost auburn, nor the color of dark honey, but merely brown. So were her eyes. Oh, they were nice enough, but certainly nothing unusual. Her face was an ordinary oval, with a nose that had a distinct tendency to tilt, and she was far too short to carry off the dramatic clothes her heart craved.

“Wouldn’t you think,” she asked the room at large, “that Nature could have done a better job? If I looked like Meghan, I could do a whole lot more for the image of the cosmetics industry!”

And the heck of it was, she added, that Meghan looked even better in person. The model had been part of a fashion show Gianna and Blake had attended just weeks ago. It had been a rare appearance for Meghan; these days she seldom had enough time—and clients seldom had enough money—to make such limited personal engagements possible. It was the first time Gianna had ever seen the woman on the modeling ramp, and she had punched Blake in the ribs. “That’s Meghan!” she had whispered.

“I know.” He hadn’t taken his eyes off the woman.

“What do you think of the dress?”

“I hate it,” he had said briefly. “It’s not your sort of thing at all; you aren’t tall enough to carry it off. What I want to know is whether the model is for sale.” And for careful, think-it-over-before-acting Blake to react that way—yes, Meghan was really something.

Thoughtfully, Gianna stared down at Meghan’s wide eyes on the magazine page. The woman breathed sexual excitement, she thought, even from the coldness of print. The unattainable—that was what Meghan stood for.

That was the quality she had sensed in this new perfume, Gianna thought. It was an unusual blend of scents, with a musk base—unlike anything she had ever smelled before. “Too glamorous for me,” she muttered. “I’m the all-American girl sort.” This new scent had left her with the impression that the wearer was not quite touchable, somehow...

That’s it, she thought. She reached for the bedside telephone and punched a string of numbers. *Sensually Meghan*, she thought. *That’s what we’ll call it, if we can only get her to do the ad campaign. It shouldn’t be hard to persuade her—*

“Hello, Gianna.” The voice that answered was slightly husky, just a little rough around the edges.

She was momentarily diverted. “How did you know it was me?”

There was a groan, and she could hear the rustle of sheets as Blake rolled over. “Because nobody else calls me at two-thirty in the morning.”

“Is it that late? Gee, I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Besides,” she said, “if you weren’t such a stick-in-the- mud, someone else might call you now and then.”

Blake grunted. “What is it this time?”

She was startled. “You sound upset, Blake. Were you busy?”

“At this hour? What did you expect me to be doing?”

“Well, it is Saturday night. I suppose you might have...” She hesitated, and put it delicately. “Company.”

“As a matter of fact, I was sleeping. Alone.”

“Don’t bite my head off! I only thought, since you’re an eligible bachelor—well, I can always hope that some day you’ll find the woman of your dreams.”

Blake sighed. “And to answer your next question, I spent the evening having dinner with my parents.”

“What a waste, Blake! How do you ever expect to enjoy yourself if you throw away weekends like this?”

“Gianna, if I did have a woman in my bed at this moment, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“And why not?” she asked indignantly. “As hard as I’ve tried to find you a suitable companion—”

“That’s exactly why I wouldn’t tell you. You’d expect a critique.”

“I always like to know how your dates turn out. When was the last time you had one, anyway?”

“Mind your own business, Gianna. Would you like it if I asked how your date went tonight?”

“Well, I wouldn’t snap your head off if you did,” Gianna said reasonably. “As a matter of fact, it was a disaster. He kept calling me Gina.”

“I’m sorry I brought it up,” muttered Blake.

“I told him that my name has three syllables. *‘It’s Gee-ann-uh,’* I kept telling him, but—”

Blake sighed. “Honey, what did you have on your little mind when you called? There must have been something.”

“Oh, there was, but now I can’t remember. All this yelling at me drove it straight out of my head. Did you tell your parents Hi for me?”

“Yes. I gave them your love and told them how much you wished you could have been there, and if it only hadn’t been for this important dinner at which you were the main speaker, wild horses couldn’t have kept you away.”

“Let’s not go overboard,” Gianna recommended. “You didn’t have to make excuses for me.”

“Oh, but I did. Mother would have been heartbroken if I’d told her you preferred a blind date to celebrating my birthday with me.”

“Oh.” It was a very small sound. “I completely forgot it was your birthday.”

“I know.”

“Well, you should have told them it was business.”

“They wouldn’t have believed it. If it had been business, I’d have been there with you.”

“Now I remember,” said Gianna. “That’s what I called you about. It was business. Remember Meghan?”

“Of course. Half the men in this country put themselves to sleep at night by dreaming about Meghan.”

“Do you really, Blake?” She was intrigued.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t? It certainly sounded like it. Well, at any rate, don’t you think she’d make a good perfume ad? It would be a terrific boost for her career, too—to be associated with Westway. We could name it after her— the new fragrance, I mean.”

“You didn’t like my list of names, hmm?”

“Really, Blake! Did you expect me to?”

“Come to think of it, no. You never do.” He yawned. “Could we talk about this tomorrow, Gianna? Or better yet, Monday at the office?”

“What’s wrong with right now?” she asked.

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“That didn’t keep you from telling me about your mother.”

“Gianna, so help me, I’m going to get an unlisted phone number.”

“No, you won’t. You know I’m at my most creative at this hour.”

“Unfortunately for me.”

“How are your parents, by the way?”

“We’ll discuss it in the morning, Gianna!”

“You don’t need to yell,” she said primly. “I can take a hint. Doughnuts and coffee at nine?”

“Your place or mine?”

“Yours, of course. I forgot to buy doughnuts when I stopped at the store today.” Gianna put the phone down, turned the light off, and settled back into her nest of pillows with a sigh.

Really, she thought, sometimes it almost seemed as if Blake wasn’t interested in Westway at all!

It was precisely nine when she pulled the door of her own apartment closed behind her and walked briskly down the hall.

It had been Blake’s idea that she should move into the building where he already lived. He had said that if he was going to have to rescue her from blown fuses, dripping faucets, and spoons stuck in garbage disposals, he’d rather not have to drive clear across Chicago to do so.

She had thought that he was going a bit overboard with the exaggeration. It had, after all, been only one blown fuse and a broken shower head in her old apartment, and she wouldn’t have called Blake at all if her landlord hadn’t refused to come over in the middle of the night. After all, as she had tried to explain to him, a non-functioning shower *was* an emergency.

“And the spoon down the garbage disposal is plainly Blake’s imagination,” she told herself firmly. She had never done that, and she didn’t expect to.

But he had been right about the apartment next to his being a nice one, and so, six months ago, she had moved.

There was no answer when she tapped on the door, and the Sunday newspaper lay undisturbed on the mat. “Lazybones,” she, muttered, and rummaged through her pockets for her key. There was no sign of life when she stepped into the apartment, so she went straight to the kitchen and started the coffee. She read the newspaper while she waited for it, and as soon as the cycle was finished, she poured two mugs full and carried them back to Blake’s bedroom.

He was sprawled across the bed, his cheek nestled against a pillow swathed in a leopard skin print. Gianna noted the pattern with approval; she’d given him the set last

Christmas, and told him that every bachelor should own something of the sort. But frankly, until now she hadn't believed that he'd even appreciated the gesture.

He was awfully nice-looking, she decided, even with the dark morning stubble of beard and his black hair standing on end. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and even tailored clothes didn't completely hide his well-developed muscles. This morning, the sheet had slipped, and the muscles in his arms and back were apparent, even relaxed as he was in sleep, because he wasn't wearing a pajama jacket.

Gianna shook her head. *I don't understand why some woman hasn't snapped him up*, she thought. *He's really a very decent sort of guy.*

She waved the mug under his nose and set it on the table, then curled up at the foot of the bed. "Good morning, Blake," she said cheerfully.

His nose twitched. He frowned just a little, then opened one eye warily, looked at her, and groaned. "It's too early," he muttered.

"I couldn't find the doughnuts. Did you hide them somewhere?"

"I forgot to buy them, too."

Gianna sipped her coffee. "Well, you could have told me that last night," she complained. "Then I wouldn't have bothered to get up so early."

"I couldn't have been so lucky." He pulled the pillows around and propped himself up. "To what do I owe the honor of finding you in my bedroom?"

"Well, there was no answer when I knocked, so I came on in." She noted, with amazement, that a slight flush had crept into his cheeks. "You're embarrassed!" she exclaimed with delight.

"It is a little unusual," Blake pointed out.

"But not exactly abnormal, for heaven's sake. It's not unheard-of for you to have a woman in your bedroom."

"That's not the point."

"Oh, I know," Gianna said wisely. "You mean you're not wearing any pajamas, and you'd like me to clear out while you get dressed. That's all right. I've seen you without clothes before. Remember, we used to take baths together."

"That was when you were two and I was four," Blake said dryly.

"Picky, picky! If you're asking me to leave..."

"I am. You can go down to the corner and get the doughnuts while I take a shower."

"I thought I'd take you out to lunch for your birthday. We can talk about Meghan."

“I don’t want to spend Sunday discussing perfume. You talk about *my* lack of social life, but the only thing *you* ever think about is Westway.”

Gianna put her nose in the air. “Well, at least I have a social life.”

“Right. With a guy who can’t even pronounce your name.” He tugged the top sheet out from under her and wrapped it toga-style around his waist.

“If he was the only one, I’d be worried,” Gianna admitted. “But there are hundreds of men out there just waiting for me to notice them.”

“I know,” Blake said unkindly. “You’ve told me.” The bathroom door shut firmly behind him.

“I’m really worried about you,” she called. “You’ve turned thirty now, and if you don’t get married soon there won’t be any eligible women left!”

He didn’t answer. The only sound was the hiss of the shower spray.

Gianna mentioned it again, at lunch. They had their favorite corner table at Coq au Vin, where the Sunday champagne brunch was the best in town. Gianna sipped her champagne, stifled a sneeze as the bubbles tickled her throat, and said, “Blake, don’t you ever think about getting married?”

He groaned. “Don’t start, Gianna! Isn’t it enough that my mother nags me about it?”

“See?” she said with satisfaction. “I knew I wasn’t the only one who thought that way.”

“It isn’t fair,” he sighed. “Nobody ever says anything to you about getting married. You’re twenty-eight. I’d think they’d be concerned about you becoming an old maid.”

“I’m in the prime of life,” Gianna announced grandly. “This isn’t the Dark Ages, you know. A woman doesn’t have to be married at all.” She giggled. “Besides, I told my mother years ago that if she ever started hinting about sons-in-law or grandchildren, I’d never speak to her again. She’s never dared to mention the subject.”

“Thanks for the advice. I’ll try it.”

“It wouldn’t work for you,” she told him. “Your mother knows what a softie you are. Besides, she’s right.”

“Why are you so anxious to get me married off, Gianna?”

She shrugged. “I’m not, actually. As far as I’m concerned, you wouldn’t even have to go through with the vows and all. I just think you’d be happier if you had a little female companionship.”

Blake shrugged and refilled her champagne glass. “What could be more companionable than finding you in my bedroom on Sunday morning?”

“Having someone there on Saturday night,” Gianna replied promptly. “Your mother is a pretty shrewd woman. I’m sure she has some ideas about who you ought to marry.”

He sighed. “Gianna, how would you like to talk about your brilliant idea concerning Meghan and the perfume?”

“I thought you said you didn’t want to talk about business on Sunday.”

“I’ll make an exception for you.”

“Oh.” She plunged into a recital of her idea, the ad campaign possibilities, the promotional value. “It will cost us, of course,” she finished up. “Meghan’s name is worth a lot right now. But it would also be valuable to her to be identified with Westway. There would have to be personal appearances, and things like that...”

He was frowning, and she paused. Despite the fact that Gianna had occasionally referred to Blake in the heat of a dispute as ‘stodgy’, she had nothing but respect for his opinion. If he didn’t think an idea would fly, chances were that he was right. She had learned that the hard way, in her first year in the company, when on several occasions she had pushed past his objections and fallen flat on her face.

But this time, Blake merely drew idle patterns on the linen tablecloth with the handle of his spoon, then said, “I don’t know why it wouldn’t work, if she isn’t tied up with a competing project. But don’t commit yourself, Gianna. We’d have to do a bit of investigating first. We wouldn’t want to find out after we’d invested a million in advertising that Meghan isn’t really the upstanding citizen we want identified with Westway.”

“Actually,” Gianna said confidentially, “I thought perhaps you’d call her up. As a man, you’ll get further.”

Blake raised an eyebrow. “So you do think I’m good for something?”

“You have wonderful instincts, darling.”

“I don’t even know her last name.”

“Neither does anyone else, Blake. It’s part of the mysterious aura. You’ll find her; I have confidence in you.”

“She may not even want to talk to me.”

Gianna leaned across the table and patted his hand. “That’s your biggest problem when it comes to women, Blake. You lack confidence.”

“I wish you’d stop treating me like a mildly retarded adolescent,” Blake complained. “I do have my share of feminine companionship, you know.”

“It’s probably my fault. I make things too easy for you.”

Blake choked on his champagne.

Gianna glared at him. "I'm serious. I'm always there. It discourages you from getting a date, because you know you can always take me. Last month when we went to the opera, for example. Really, Blake— you called me just two hours before curtain time."

"What you don't know," he said mildly, "is that I'd already exhausted my little black book by then. Nobody wanted to go to the opera that night."

"Not on two hours' notice, no."

"I'd spent days on the phone," he said, looking mournful. "And actually, I only waited so long to call you because I knew if I asked you any earlier, you'd forget all about it."

"That's got nothing to do with it. We're going to have to work at this." She stared thoughtfully across the table at him. "Perhaps we just need to find some new entries for your black book. I know plenty of—"

"I think I can manage that by myself, Gianna." Blake's words were soft, but his tone was suddenly not to be argued with.

Gianna, however, had barely noticed. She was waving across the room at a redhead who had just come in. "There's Cluny Brown," she said to Blake. He looked unmoved.

The woman swooped across the room and vigorously kissed the air beside Gianna's cheek. "It's so nice to see you," she said. Her eyes were on Blake, who rose politely.

Gianna lifted an eyebrow. So Cluny Brown reacted to Blake like steel filings to a magnet, hmm? Well, he *was* good-looking.

She glanced at the young man who was following Cluny, carrying her fur jacket. It wasn't cold enough yet for fur, Gianna thought, but that was Cluny all over. Not a bad-looking man, either. He looked a little dippy about Cluny.

Then he looked at Gianna, and she decided that perhaps she'd been mistaken about his feelings for Cluny. Gianna had gotten positive responses from men before, but this was the first time she had ever been actively adored. Suddenly, the young man bore a remarkable resemblance to a beagle puppy.

"And who is this?" she asked, and offered her hand.

"I'm Norman Brown, ma'am," he said, and took her fingers as carefully as if they were made of antique glass.

"My third cousin, from Houston," offered Cluny. She was still staring soulfully up at Blake.

"Are you going to be here long?" asked Gianna.

“Not nearly long enough,” he said, with a touch of Texas twang. “Now that I’ve met you.” Then he blushed beet-red, as if he had said something impolite.

Gianna sighed. “Well, we’ll have to help Cluny show you the town,” she said. “Dinner next Saturday night? Blake’s been wanting to spend some more time with Cluny. It will give us a chance to get better acquainted, Norman.”

Blake glared across the table at her. Norman looked as if his favorite fantasy had suddenly sprung to life. Cluny was clinging to Blake’s arm. “What a lovely idea!” she crooned. “There’s that new restaurant up on Rush Street—I’ve been wanting to go. What a special idea, Blake!”

Ah, well, thought Gianna, I didn’t want any recognition for the idea. Let Blake get the credit.

She looked up at Norman, who was still clutching her hand, and sighed inwardly. It would be worth putting up with an evening in his company, she thought, if Blake had a good time. And Cluny would make sure of that.

Cluny and Norman went off to their table, and Blake, looking like a thundercloud, sat down, folded his arms on the edge of the table, and glared at Gianna.

“What’s your problem?” she asked.

“I was just wondering,” murmured Blake, “whether the pleasure of murdering you right here would make up for the inconvenience of spending the rest of my life in jail. On the whole, I think it would.”

“What? I don’t understand you, Blake. Do you mean the thing with Cluny?”

“Of course I mean the thing with Cluny. What other outrageous stunts have you pulled this morning? I do not want to spend Saturday night with—”

“You can’t mean you have something better to do? Besides, Cluny is a nice girl. She’s always ready for a good time. She might even be the sort who’ll go to the opera on two hours’ notice.”

“I have one woman like that in my life,” Blake pointed out. “I have no need of another. Let’s go.”

“Well, I was only trying to pep up your social life. You could at least be a good sport about it.”

He retrieved her wool coat from the cloakroom attendant and held it for her. “I’ll be a good sport on Saturday night,” he said, “since it appears that I have no choice in the matter. But in the meantime, please don’t get the impression that I approve. And if you *ever* try anything like this again—”

The air was cold against her face as they walked across the parking lot to his car. She slipped on a patch of hard-packed snow. “It’s awfully slippery out here, isn’t it? Wouldn’t you think they’d at least clear the concrete off?”

Blake cast a scathing glance at her high-heeled pumps. “Some sensible shoes would help. And stop trying to change the subject!”

She settled herself in the passenger seat and said plaintively, “Goodness, Blake, one would think I’d asked the girl to marry you.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Gianna blinked. She had never heard quite that note in Blake’s voice before.

“I’m sorry, dear,” she said soothingly. “I only have your best interests at heart, you know.”

“You and my mother,” grumbled Blake.

She snapped her fingers. “Now that’s an idea. I haven’t had lunch with your mother in ages. Perhaps I’ll call her up this week.”

“I wouldn’t advise that you ask my mother who she thinks I should marry.” The car accelerated hard and slipped neatly into traffic, pressing Gianna back into the leather seat.

“Oh? Why not? I’m sure she has an opinion. Your mother is really a wonderful judge of character. Perhaps you should take Cluny out to meet her.”

“I wouldn’t take Cluny anywhere, if I wasn’t pushed into it.”

“Now, Blake – how do you expect to recognize the woman of your dreams if you won’t spend any time with women in general?”

“Why are you so certain I’m looking for the woman of my dreams?”

“My goodness, we’re touchy this morning!” She settled herself primly. “Yes, I think I’ll have a chat with your mother.”

“I wouldn’t, Gianna.” He swung the car into his numbered spot in the parking ramp under the apartment building.

“Why on earth not? She’s obviously got to stop nagging you or you’ll be turned off the idea completely.”

He didn’t look at her, but she noticed that his hand was clenched on the wheel.

“Your mother and I get along beautifully,” she went on. “I’m sure I can talk to her about it.”

“That’s part of the problem,” murmured Blake.

“What? That we both care very much for you?”

“That’s the other part of the problem. You see, Gianna my dear, my mother thinks...”
He stopped.

Gianna slid out of the car without waiting for him to open her door. “Yes?” she asked, trying to keep up with his long strides on the way to the elevator.

He looked down at her, and there was sternly repressed humor in his eyes. “I ought to just let you walk into it,” he mused. “You deserve every uncomfortable moment of it.” Then he sighed, as if thinking better of it, and said, very clearly, “You see, Gianna, my mother thinks I should marry you.”