

Pet Sitter

A JENNA STACK MYSTERY

By Amy Eyrie and Alix Sloan

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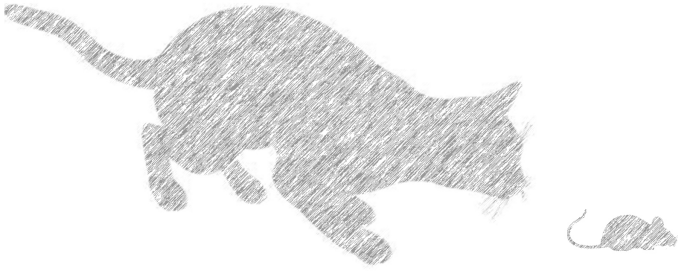
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This book is for all of the pets, furry, fluffy, feathered, slimy, scaly and sleek, who have filled our lives with unconditional love over the years.

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CHAPTER ONE

Leaving Liam

It's 3am. The car service will be here any minute. I take a last look at the Williamsburg apartment where I've spent the last four years of my life. Maroon walls covered in vintage rock posters. The lopsided curtains I made myself, even though I can't sew. The half-full jar of change. Liam's beloved LP collection we spent weekends at flea markets trying to complete. His favorite guitar leans against a Marshall amp. My psych books from college are stacked in the bookcase with a thousand post-it notes sticking out. I'll have to come back for those later. On the top shelf is a picture taken the day we moved in together. I was so happy, so in love.

I'm going to miss curling up on the window seat with our coffee Sunday mornings and taking long walks together in the afternoon. I'm *not* going to miss bandmates crashing on the couch, dirty looks from groupies, hauling music equipment or wondering where Liam is all night.

I pull a roller bag stuffed with clothes and my laptop computer over to a couple of banker's boxes jammed with

my criminology books and personal files.

Sharon, the manager of Cellos where I bartend part time, let me go early so I could come home and pack. I've watered the plants and left instructions. I hope they survive, but I have my doubts. Live with a rock dude and you kind of have to expect rock dude behavior, which doesn't exactly include misting plants, at least not with water. I was twenty-two when I met Liam my senior year of college. I expected a fling. But in New York flings often turn into living arrangements.

Things haven't added up for months. Tonight is just the clear answer to a series of questions. The grand, embarrassing, heartbreaking, finale.

A key rattles in the lock and Liam pushes the door open. Damn it. I was hoping to be gone before he got home.

Not surprisingly, he's been drinking. He leans against the wall, looking rumpled and sexy as hell in black jeans and a Passion Pit T shirt washed twelve-too-many times so it barely fits his slight frame. He grins sloppily, all dimples and boyish charm. He reaches for me, then stops when he sees the bag and boxes.

"Jenna, what the...?" the look on his face is like a kid whose balloon just popped. I walk over to the computer and tap a key. Liam's Facebook page comes up with a picture of a naked blonde strategically covered with Hello Kitty dolls.

"I'm not sure what's worse, her comment, or her spelling."

He shakes his head and asks innocently, his voice slurring, "What does she say?"

“I’ll try to translate. *Thnx 4 lst nite bad boy. Sooooo hot.*”
I coo in a high pitched voice.

“That doesn’t mean anything. That’s just Roxy.” He feigns confusion. “She’s a girl I know. A performance artist. She’s crazy.” Then he adds as if he needs to explain the obvious appeal, “But she’s into some really cool stuff.”

I hold my phone up. “Yeah, she tweeted details of that cool stuff to half of New York City. You might want to show her which button is private message and which is public.”

He furrows his brow and crosses his arms defiantly, like I’m the one being ridiculous.

“And at the bar tonight,” I continue, “I got to field apologies from supposed friends and regulars who knew what was up and didn’t say anything.”

That seals the deal. He knows he’s busted and there’s no denying it. He took Roxy out on the town while I was slinging drinks at Cellos, assuming no one would break dude code and tell me. What he didn’t consider is the girlfriends of those dudes all live in fear they’ll be publicly cheated on and humiliated the same way I’ve been. Once word hit Twitter they came out of the woodwork to soothe their consciences and prove their allegiance in the hopes they won’t have to suffer the same fate.

“How long have you been seeing her, Liam?” I don’t know why I care. I doubt she’s the first.

He shakes his head sadly. A lock of dark blonde hair flops a little too strategically across his bloodshot, but still hypnotizing, green eyes.

“But Jenna...” I can see his brain working through the whiskey haze, avoiding the question, trying to come up with an argument that will have some traction. I see the exact moment, when his impossibly soft lips curl up in a half smile. He thinks he has it. I can’t help but be curious what his next words will be.

“But we just bought a microwave!” he whines.

Seriously? If that’s the best he can do I have *soooo* made the right decision. Let Roxy have him.

“Liam? I need some time, okay?” Like a century, I’m thinking. But I just want to get out of here.

I try to push past him with my bag. He switches his focus away from small appliances and on to his best weapon. He slouches against the wall, dejected and looks me up and down, all brilliant eyes and pouty lips. I open my mouth to tell him to screw himself, or Roxy or whoever he wants, as long as it’s not me and my self-respect anymore when he leans in, slips a finger through the belt loop of my jeans and pulls me close.

“Come on, J,” he pleads. “I need you. You’re the only one for me. Pleeease?”

My voice catches in my throat, outrage evaporates like a puff of steam through a subway grate and is replaced by smoldering, albeit self-destructive, lust. Did I mention that Liam is infuriatingly sexy and surprisingly persuasive? Even smelling like cigarettes and whiskey, he’s a force of nature. A charismatic, manipulative, stinky force of nature.

I hear three short honks outside. Saved by Brooklyn Best Car Service.

“I’ll be at Dave’s.”

I push Liam away a little too roughly and drag the roller-bag down the stairs half expecting him to follow me with the boxes. No luck. I race back up to grab them and find him at his computer typing. He hears me walk in.

“I’m telling her it’s not cool, Jenna. Posting it. Publicly. See?”

Is he kidding? Like that’s going to fix it? There’s something a little crazy and sad about Liam. He is the consummate manchild, unwilling or unable to take responsibility. And tonight, Roxy has provided me with a much needed moment of clarity — I don’t want to be his mom anymore.

I close the door behind me and heft the boxes down to the waiting driver. He tosses them carelessly into the trunk before pulling out into the rainy night, through the quiet streets, across the Williamsburg bridge and into Manhattan. As we cross the East River, the skyline twinkles. I imagine the city is welcoming me with open arms. I consider my situation. I’m single, I’m broke and I’m technically homeless. Thank God for Dave.

CHAPTER TWO

Tails of the City

Dave answers his door in striped flannel pajama bottoms and a wife beater T shirt. Tall, blonde, chiseled and unnaturally tan, he looks like a Bedtime Ken doll. He pulls off my wet jacket, shoves a glass of red wine in my hand and leads me to the kitchen. Dave lives off Union Square in a two-bedroom apartment, second floor, no view but so chic he doesn't need one. No pets. Technically small dogs are allowed in the building, but not in Dave's place, which is ironic considering it's the world headquarters of *Tails of the City Pet Sitting Agency*.

"I ordered Pad Thai, chicken parm, sushi and pancakes." He gestures to the kitchen counter, covered in take out bags. "There's white wine, red wine, vodka and scotch." He counts off on his fingers, then gestures for me to sit.

Dave is always the first person I call in a disaster. I shouldn't be surprised he's spent the last two hours prepping for my arrival. Dave likes to take care of people, and things. And he's been encouraging me to leave Liam for ages.

“Sit. Talk. Don’t talk. What do you need?” he asks, fully engrossed in his role as caretaker.

I lift up the glass he handed me, “Right now, this is it. Thanks.” I take a deep gulp of the sweet, tangy wine, feeling the warmth flood into my body, then hold the glass out for more. “Oh yeah, and the last few years of my life back, please?” I joke halfheartedly.

Dave doesn’t laugh but instead looks at me sympathetically. That’s all it takes. Tears start rolling down my cheeks. Damn it! I swore I was all cried out. He puts his arms around me.

“Let it go, hon.”

I do just that and have a good, long boogery cry all over his well-muscled shoulder and clean, white tank top. When it’s time to blow my nose, he’s ready with aloe infused Kleenex. Honestly, he thinks of everything.

Dave and I met the first week of college and have been best friends ever since. I was there for him when he came out to his parents. He was there for me when my brother got arrested. He even came to court the day Tyler was sentenced. We’ve seen each other through a long list of boyfriends so this isn’t anything new. It’s just been a while since I was the one crying.

“You know I never liked him,” Dave interrupts my thoughts.

“You never like anyone.”

“You haven’t made it easy, Jenna,” he scolds. “You have atrocious taste in men.”

“Don’t be mean. I’m in crisis. Besides, he got the

apartment!” I can’t take a lecture right now or a trip down inappropriate boyfriend lane.

“Fine. But I expect you to give my opinion more weight from now on.”

He’s got a good point. I have made some awful choices, not the least of which was staying with Liam for so long. Although I have to say it was just in the last year, when I started fine-tuning my instincts at criminology school, that my radar really went off. Or maybe Liam began wandering when I started getting stronger and found something I was good at, something I loved more than him.

“Deal,” I agree. “Although I’m off men for now.”

“Me too!”

We clink glasses in a toast.

Dave recently broke up with his live-in boyfriend and sometime assistant Rob, creating a bit of a problem for *Tails of the City*. Rob not only screened and hired all of the help, he went out on some of the tougher jobs himself. Rob’s a natural with animals. Dave, on the other hand, isn’t a big pet person, which I find amusing. Basically, Dave needed extra cash to supplement his salary at Barney’s and fund his passion for travel. Based on the ladies he encountered at work, he suspected there was a moneyed client base willing to pay for high-end, personalized pet care. With that in mind he started *Tails of the City* two years ago. Ironically, he’s done such a great job and the business is so successful, that he not only quit his day job, but he’s too busy to go anywhere.

“Take a shower. I’ll make you a plate. Thailand, Italy,

Japan or U.S.?”

For some reason pancakes sound perfect right now.

“U.S., thanks.”

I head for the bathroom. A year ago, Dave decided if he was going to be at home full time, he should have a beautiful place to spend the day and redid the place into his dream apartment. The kitchen has all new modern appliances selected with Rob’s love of cooking in mind. The decor is design magazine chic, a soft warm gray with carefully selected accessories and pops of blue and green throughout. And the shower, stocked with fancy bath products, has one of those giant, high shower heads and ferocious water pressure. It’s exactly what I need.

After replacing the bar smell with bergamot and lavender and the self pity with exhaustion and relief, I pull on an old Dinosaur Jr. T shirt and a pair of boxer shorts and find Dave in front of the TV. He’s made up one of the two couches with sheets and a pillow and is helping himself to the Sushi I rejected. I dig into the pancakes.

“Better?”

“Hmmm,” I answer, my mouth full of starchy goodness.

“Thanks.”

He winks at me. “Anytime. Stay as long as you need.”

“I hope you don’t end up regretting that offer.”

Going back to school and practically supporting Liam so he could keep his schedule flexible for gigs, has left me in a less than ideal financial situation. I have no idea how I’m going to afford the deposit on a new apartment. I might be here a while.

“We’ll figure it out. I’ve got some ideas,” Dave assures me.

A blood curdling screech shoots out of the television. What looks like a malnourished bat is being immersed in someone’s kitchen sink and the bat doesn’t like it.

“What on earth are you watching!?” I ask as I shovel in another huge bite.

“*My Cat From Hell*. Animal Planet. They’re trying to bathe a pissed off Sphynx.”

The cat lets out another mind-bending shriek.

Cheeks bulging with pancakes I can’t open my mouth so I attempt to communicate my horror with a skeptical look.

“Oh it’s great! This really sweet guy helps people with their cat problems. But it’s always the people, Jenna. It’s never the cat. It’s hilarious and he’s a genius. I love it!”

I’m more of a dog person but I settle in. I could use a good laugh and anything is better than thinking about my own problems.



The sound of Dave’s voice breaks through a vague dream. My brother Tyler is riding his motorcycle on a twisting country road. I call out to him, but he doesn’t answer. I scream. He doesn’t hear me. I wake up anxious and disoriented. Dave’s muffled voice drifts in through the closed door to the next room.

I check my phone. It’s 8am. I must have fallen asleep once the hairless cat stopped screaming. No texts or calls from Liam. I wonder if he called Roxy for consolation after I left?

I'd love to put a pillow over my head and go back under but Dave's day starts early and I'm in his space. Gotta get up. I follow the scent of freshly brewed coffee into the kitchen, grab a cup and head for his office.

This is where the designer vibe ends. Everything in Dave's office is in a state of chaos. He sits behind a big, metal 1950's schoolteacher desk, bare feet up, talking on one of those oversized telephone headsets, people wore in 70's TV commercials. Where does he find these things? He's wearing tan cargo shorts and a fitted blue T shirt. As always, he looks clean shaven, minty fresh and perfectly toned. Behind him is a wall covered with photos of dogs, cats, birds, bunnies and other animals looking ridiculous in costumes, frolicking in the country, or happily posing with their families. To his left is the job board. Active jobs are posted in bright orange with client notes in blue. Dave waves me in, indicating I'm not interrupting so I sit down in a chair and wait.

Dave is speaking in his most accommodating voice, "Well, Tony is one of our newer hires."

Silence.

He makes a yammering gesture with his hand and closes his eyes as if falling asleep.

"I'll send a replacement today. Absolutely. I'll send our absolute best! Thank you."

Dave pulls off his headset and turns his full attention towards me, "Oh honey, that woman is AWFUL. She is Miss Awful. Miss Awful, USA. Some drama about how Tony's been walking the dog wrong."

I shoot a knowing glare over the top of my mug as I sip my coffee.

“Okay. Okay. Tony *is* a little unreliable,” he smirks.

Once Rob was out of the picture, recruiting standards at *Tails of the City* took a drastic nosedive. Exhibit A: Tony is a cute college freshman Dave met at a bar.

“Anyway... I have a plan!”

I love a plan. I need a plan. “I’m listening...”

“Work for me!” Dave announces as if it’s a new idea.

I should have seen this coming. He’s been trying to get me on board since he started the business.

“Dave, you know I love animals but I just can’t. It makes me too sad.” I volunteered at an animal shelter all through high school. My guidance counselor said it would look good on college applications and I thought it would be fun. But it was hard work and even worse emotionally. All of those sweet unwanted cats and dogs, victims of human abuse, irresponsibility or stupidity. I can still see their furry faces and big eyes looking at me through mesh fences, wagging their tails, waiting.

“Stop being a baby Jenna. You need the money. I need the help. You have tons of experience with animals. And trust me these pets aren’t sad. They have better lives than we do. They have health insurance!”

He has a point there. I want to help Dave out. But I’m skeptical. I’m also busy.

“I don’t know, I’ve got bar shifts, classes...”

“I’ll start you with a plum assignment. You can see how it goes. I was going to give it to Tony but screw him. He

doesn't deserve it."

"What is it?"

"Two weeks in a lovely apartment downtown. Just a few subway stops from the bar. Laundry in the unit. Cats only. Easy Breezy."

Getting out of Dave's hair for a couple of weeks and making some extra money sounds pretty good.

"What would I have to do?"

"*What would you have to do?*" he looks at me like I'm an idiot, "Pet the cats, scoop the litter, make sure they have food and water. Don't trash the place."

I've never had a cat but I've spent plenty of time with them. As long as none are screeching and hairless how hard could it be?

"And there's a washing machine *in* the apartment?" That part sounds too good to be true.

"Washer *and* dryer. The client, Andrea Billingsworth, leaves today for Aspen. You can move right in."

I want to ask Dave what it pays but with everything he's doing for me I'd feel like a jerk. "Okay. I'm in."

"No doorman. She left a hide-a-key." He's leaning over handing me an orange assignment slip with the address and instructions when he pauses. "Actually... As long as you're going to be downtown, how about a teensy little favor?"

Uh oh.

"That shrew was Evan Blake's assistant," he points to the phone. "Evan is a super sweet money guy, been a client for years, very well connected. He is *not* happy and I can *not* lose him just because Tony can't figure out how to walk a

dog.”

Dave is one of the most generous people I’ve ever met which often makes me forget that the moment anyone gives him an inch he is laying asphalt for the mile he’s about to take. His boundaries are non-existent.

“Dave, I don’t have time to run all over town for you. Not with school and homework and the bar...” I suggest, trying to steer him away from this idea.

“Please? It’s really close to where you’ll be staying and super low maintenance. Just one dog. A cute little French Bulldog named Max. Two walks a day.”

I shake my head, “I’m not exactly emotionally stable these days. I don’t want to let you down. Let’s start small.”

“Come on! Take pity on me. That damn Susie Scott has been trying to poach Evan Blake for years.” He picks up a glossy *Susie’s PetLove* brochure from his desk and waves it furiously.

Susie Scott is Dave’s only real competition, his arch nemesis. *Susie’s PetLove* is backed by her exceedingly adoring, obscenely rich Long Island stepfather. Susie has unlimited resources and unbridled ambition. I need to tread carefully here.

“Don’t you sometimes take care of the high end clients yourself?” I try.

“The meet and greet. The instructions. Not the dog walking! Do you think Susie walks dogs herself? How would it look if Evan Blake ran into the owner of the company walking his dog?”

“What’s so special about Evan Blake?”

“Well, aside from being gorgeous... And I mean GORGEOUS...” Dave picks up a *Vanity Fair* Magazine, opens it to a tabbed double paged spread and pushes it across the desk revealing a photo of a dozen beautiful women posing with an array of animals.

I don’t get it. “Is he a drag queen?” I ask.

That gets a giggle, “No!”

I read the headline: *Fabulous Faces of the Faux Fur and Furry Friends Fete.*

“An alliteration specialist?”

“Don’t be silly...” He taps his finger with irritation at a line of tiny print. At the end of a long list of sponsors, I see *Tails of the City Pet Sitting Agency.*

“Oooh, that’s cool!”

“It cost me five grand, but worth every penny,” Dave squeals excitedly.

“What do you get for five grand?”

“Good publicity and a ticket to the cocktail reception at the event of the season. See this one with the Maltipoo? That’s Fatima Ab El Malik.” He points at an elegant, middle-aged woman in a navy blue, long sleeve, high-neck dress holding a small white dog. “Fatima is the *crème de la crème* of New York Society. This is *her* event.” He pauses for effect. “And Evan Blake works for her *husband*, Sheik Mohammad Ab El Malik.”

“Am I supposed to know who these people are?”

Dave sighs, exasperated. He walks over to the window and points to the skyline. “See the black glass high rise over there?” I nod.

“The sheik’s company, Bokra International, owns that building and a dozen more. He’s one of the ten richest men in the world and Evan Blake *manages his finances.*”

“Oh.”

“Evan got me an audience with Fatima who invited me to bid on providing pet services for the furry fete, but I was so short staffed because of that deserter Rob I couldn’t even bid. That damn Susie Scott got the contract.”

I clearly remember it was Dave who sent Rob packing but I’m not going to get into that now. I take a closer look at the glossy photo spread. What a group. Two ladies down from Mrs. Ab El Malik is a fierce glamazon wrapped in a horrible looking snake. Yuck.

“Who’s that?”

“Oh that’s Cintia. Wife number two.”

Huh? “As in the sheik has two wives?” I ask, confused.

“Every sheik has at least a few.” He responds dismissively and then continues, “I had a personal play date with Honey last week. I do think Fatima liked me, though. I mean, she’s so much more Barney’s than Target.”

We all know Dave is Barney’s. I’m guessing Susie is Target. What does that make me? Corner bodega?

“Who’s Honey?” I ask, skeptically. Now that sounds like a drag queen.

“Fatima’s Maltipoo!” he replies exasperated. “Will you do it? Please? The fete is a huge annual event. I really need to stay on Evan’s good side to have any chance to bid for next year.”

“Ugh.” I feel my resolve dissipating. “If it’s that

important to you, fine. But just until you find someone else.”

Dave plucks another orange job slip off the board and hands it to me.

“Okay. And Jenna, try to look nice. These are elegant people.” Now that I’ve agreed he’s on to critiquing my appearance, “No Chuck Taylor’s. No old T shirts. And promise me, you won’t screw it up?”

“Scout’s honor,” I pledge. Not that I was a Girl Scout. It’s just something we say to reassure one another. Besides, it will be good to stay busy so I don’t obsess on Liam and my current situation. And I can always call Dave with questions.

“And stay away from Evan Blake. No flirting. Think of him as your boss, your off limits boss.”

“Please!” I respond envisioning the snooty, drunk, frat boy types with too much cash who crowd the bar in their suits at happy hour, “Finance guys aren’t exactly my cup of tea. Besides...” I point at him sternly, “we’re off men, remember?”

He smiles and hands me Blake’s address and the magazine. “Take it. I have more copies!” He probably has twenty.

As I head to the living room to grab my bags, Dave calls after me in his best Wicked Witch voice, “You’re mine now, my pretty. Took me two years to snare you and I’m never letting go! Ha ha ha!”

CHAPTER THREE

Feline Fiasco

I exit the 5 train at dusk. The Financial District is desolate. Wall Street feels a little like a scene from one of those virus movies where everyone dies but there's no property damage. A crush of buildings loom in the fading light but where are the people? I'm considering how spooky this is and wondering how safe I am when a clean cut lawyer type in a suit dashes out of a revolving door and into a subway entrance. Rushing to get home before he turns into a zombie? I haven't spent much time this far downtown. I'm not sure I'm going to like it.

I find the client's apartment building easily enough, right across from a Gristedes grocery store. That will come in handy. I punch in the code for the main entrance and enter a simple lobby with a bank of aluminum mailboxes to the left and an elevator straight ahead. It feels odd letting myself into a stranger's home.

On the fifteenth floor, the hallways are cream colored, soundless and empty. I locate the apartment, set all of my stuff down, dig the hidden key out of a planter, open the

door and step inside.

The smell hits me first - then the cats. When Dave said “cats,” I wasn’t expecting four. But here they are, all different sizes and shapes, rubbing, purring, circling, mewling. Two adorable smallish black and whites appear to be siblings. Then there’s a muscular orange tabby and a beautiful gray short hair with white sox. I’ll check their tags for names later. Right now I’d better get the door shut so none slip out. The second thing I notice, aside from being a little ripe with eau de cat, is that this is a kick-ass apartment.

The living room has a beautiful view of downtown, enormous flat screen TV and cable box. Score. The pink sofa, quilted throw and zebra lampshades are a little too girly for me but cozy and kind of offbeat, like someone’s weird, hip grandma had her way with the place. The kitchen is open to the living room and a small dining nook with an old fashioned wrought iron table and chairs. On closer inspection, the cabinets are crammed with every appliance imaginable including a pasta maker. Too bad I don’t cook. Next to the fridge is a fully stocked bar and temperature controlled wine cabinet. There’s a note on the fridge. *“Last minute trip. Full fridge. Eat - and drink - whatever you want. PLEASE!”* Below that is another, much longer note titled *“Instructions.”* I scan the list of names, contact numbers and precise details.

I slide open an accordion door to reveal the most coveted of all appliances, a small stacked washer and dryer. Jackpot!

I continue my tour of my new temporary home. In the bedroom, a fluffy white Persian stares at me defiantly from a pile of pink and white pillows. Uh oh! That brings the cat count up to five. The bathroom has a glorious full-size tub and curled in the sink, is a tiny, sweet tiger-striped kitten bringing the cat count up to six. I'm not sure if that's even legal.

Dave's easy breezy gig is quickly turning into a feline fiasco. And what if I can't get rid of the smell? Will I get used to it? I pull my phone out and text him: *I'm going to kill you! How many are there?!?!*

I find three litter boxes and a dozen bowls. I follow the elaborate instructions that pretty much just add up to scoop poop, change water and feed. It takes about fifteen minutes. I set the poop bag in the hallway and open a few windows, making sure they all have screens. Dave texts back: *6. Don't be mad.*

At least they're all accounted for but I'm still a little peeved. I'll definitely need to keep a close eye on them. Don't want one wasting away shut in a closet somewhere.

Me: *You said this job was my easy intro!*

Dave: *It is! You don't have to walk them! And the client is gone.*

Me: *Have you ever poop-scooped 6 cats? It's going to be a full time job!*

Dave: *I'll give you a poop bonus. ;)*

Me: *It's going to take more than a bonus. You tricked me!*

Dave: *I can't help it. You're so easy!*

This isn't headed anywhere productive. Besides, I've got

to get over to Evan Blake's and I still need to change and grab a snack. Unpacking I realize I left a much needed text book in my rented locker at school. I spent the extra money thinking it would be nice not to have to lug books around. But I just keep forgetting stuff. Although now that I'm transient, the locker might come in handy.

Keeping in mind Dave's lecture about my appearance, I kick off my tennis shoes, open my bag and pull out the most conservative piece of clothing I own, a fitted v-neck argyle sweater, found at a thrift store back home last Christmas. I pair it with a gray skirt above the knee, tights and the gorgeous knee high black suede boots I bought on sale last month after a particularly good night in bar tips.

I bring my toiletries to the bathroom and evaluate what's going on above the neck. Pretty much same as always. My mousy brown hair won't grow past my shoulders. My hazel eyes don't flash anything in sunlight. My skin is fair with a few freckles but not enough to be a real freckle thing. Not terrible looking, just plain. I find some interesting looking volumizing gel in the cabinet and fluff the product into my hair. I swipe on some extra mascara and add lip tint. At least I made an effort.

I throw on a \$5 lavender street pashmina and the leather motorcycle jacket I borrowed from Sharon and haven't returned yet. I'm feeling pretty sassy. Dave would approve.

With a few minutes to spare I grab a Greek yoghurt from the fridge and sit down at the little table. A few bites in, my phone buzzes.

Dave: *Still mad?* I forgot we were having a text war.

By now the tabby is lying across my feet and the twins are curled up together on the table. The kitten has emerged, scrambled into my lap and rolled into a tiny, purring, striped ball. None of them wants anything but attention, and they all seem happy. I take a picture of the pair snuggled up on the table, and text it to Dave followed by...

Me: *Actually, no. Luv from the House of 1000 Cats! XOX*
“Easy” J.

CHAPTER FOUR

Meeting Evan Blake

The head of the Criminology Department at University of Manhattan, Professor Wolfson, encourages us to practice what he calls “observations” whenever possible. My observation about pet sitting so far is it’s kind of fun to see how the one percent lives, and the free food and booze are going to make the transition to my new life much easier. But if the list Andrea Billingsworth left is anything to go by, my face to face with pet parent Evan Blake may not be easy.

Using the map app on my smart phone, I easily navigate the short walk to the steel and granite monolith that is Evan Blake’s apartment. The streetlights are just beginning to turn on. The evening air is cool and damp. I pass scaffolding, a few banks, a real estate office and a Dunkin’ Donuts. The Financial District is a mixture of old and new architecture; cloth awnings, arched windows, heavy plate glass. It’s hard to tell the office buildings from the apartments. I check the address before pushing through the double doors into a brightly lit lobby.

A young, gangly doorman wearing a red uniform with brass buttons, guards the lobby somberly. He looks down his long nose at me. His pants are three inches too short on a tall, skinny frame, revealing white socks and shiny black shoes. He has a narrow face and hang dog eyes. A name tag on his chest reads Lloyd.

“May I help you?”

“Hi. I’m Jenna Stack. I’m here to see Evan Blake?” Lloyd walks over to his reception desk and checks a list.

“Oh yes, you’re the girl, here to walk the dog. Mr. Blake had to step out. He asked that you take Maximilian for a walk and await his return.” He pushes a key and a business card across the desk. I peer at the card, confused. “Mr. Blake’s card. You’ll find a map to the preferred park on the reverse.”

So we have “preferred” parks, do we? That does not bode well for my impression of Evan Blake. I start to head deeper into the building when I realize I don’t know where to go. “Excuse me, Lloyd?” He eyes me disdainfully. “Which apartment?”

“18J.”

After passing signs for a gym, pool and laundry, I find a bank of elevators with shiny brass doors. I barely have time to program Evan Blake’s number into my phone as I’m whisked up 18 flights. This must be one of those post 9/11 redevelopment buildings, meant to entice wealthy business people into living downtown. The decor is industrial chic, all metal, granite and glass, cold but ritzy, very masculine. I pass a series of black doors and reach 18J. The key fits but

won't turn. There's snuffling at the base of the door. Must be Max wanting his walk. I jiggle and twist intently. Ugh! I do not want to have to ask Lloyd for help.

"The lock can be a bit tricky." A deep voice startles me. I turn around. Standing directly behind me is a tall stranger wearing a crisp navy blue suit. He has soft, caramel brown eyes, straight white teeth and a dusky complexion. His hair is black and silky. His smile disarming. It's as if someone took a young George Clooney, put him in a toaster oven, then sprinkled him with cinnamon and sugar. A nervous flutter rushes up to my heart. Yum!

"Sorry. I didn't mean to sneak up on you." He smells exactly like cut grass and lemonade. "You're here for Max?" I nod, unable to speak. "You're Jenna, right?"

"Yes. Jenna Stack, and you're, um, Mr. Blake?"

"Call me Evan." He smiles, gently plucks the key from my hand, then patiently demonstrates, "Push in, then pull back slightly, and..." Click.

The door opens and waiting just inside is an adorable, chubby, cream colored French Bulldog. He stares me down, head tilted, one ear up. There's a stranger in his home and he's not sure how he feels about it. I carefully offer a hand to sniff, like we did at the shelter when a dog seemed wary. He sniffs, loses interest and turns his attention to Evan.

"Hey buddy. How ya doing?" The dog jumps up into his master's extended arms and licks his face in a slobbery display of affection that Evan rewards with a big, goofy, dazzling smile. Sharon once showed me a web site called cute boys with cats. I wonder if there's one for hot men

with dogs? I guarantee this image would get a lot of hits.

People meet through their pets all the time, right? It would be such a good story for the grandkids. Too bad I'm off men and Evan Blake is off limits. He probably wouldn't go for me anyway. But it's fun to think about.

I shake myself out of the fantasy and take a glance around. The apartment is utterly fantastic and a little bit depressing at the same time. A large desk faces a wall of windows and a long balcony. An open floorplan reveals stainless steel appliances, granite countertops and a professional espresso machine. The decor is cream and gray with gleaming wood floors, but without a single knick knack or personal touch. Like it's a model home and he's just pretending to live there. Even Max, who has trotted off to sit quietly on an area rug, looks like a prop.

Evan sets his keys on his desk, rifles through a neat stack of papers and hands me one. It's a very long, very detailed list: favorite toys, friendly and unfriendly dogs at the park, walking routes with maps, off limits furniture and rooms, dog gate schematics, anti-bacterial poop bags, approved snacks, morning food, evening food and of course the ubiquitous contacts list. It's worse than I thought.

"Max likes a walk and a little time in the park. Afterwards he gets one treat from the blue bag and a nibble of the wheat grass." Wheat grass. Really?

Evan picks up a lint roller and begins rolling the hair off his suit as he continues. I force myself to stay tuned to his voice. "Dr. Marchand is his vet. Dr. Franzi, his therapist." I'm about to interrupt to ask shrink or PT when he hands

me the roller and turns his back, “Would you mind?” I oblige awkwardly, sneaking a sniff of him, as he continues. “Oh! And it goes without saying he shouldn’t be out on the balcony alone...” And with that he turns around, blushing slightly and adds, “But I can’t help saying it.”

I nod, trying to reassure him that this sort of pet parent crazy is all in a day’s work. Evan takes the lint roller from me and finishes up with, “Shall I email you a copy?” He may be handsome and smell good but this guy is seriously uptight.

“That’d be great,” I respond with fake enthusiasm.

Evan passes me Max’s rolled up leash. He squeezes my hand gently and looks me directly in the eyes, “I’m so glad you’re here, Jenna. Thank you.” I have to stop myself from gasping. Is he flirting with me? A buzzing noise interrupts the moment.

“Mr. Blake? Mrs. Ab El Malik here to see you,” Lloyd’s voice drips from the intercom.

“Send her up.” Evan turns to me. “Jenna, will you get the door? I’ll be right back.” He disappears down a hallway. Moments later, the door opens without a knock. I recognize one of the glamazons Dave showed me this morning, live and in person.

Cintia Ab El Malik almost glows as she floats into the room. She’s wearing a flowing, slightly transparent, orange tunic, skinny tan pants and gold flats. For a moment I’m not sure she’s real. This woman is perfectly put together and gorgeous. She has long, dark hair, flawless skin and eyes a fiery shade of copper. Even with the extra effort, I’m

a peasant by comparison. I'm about to introduce myself when Evan returns. Cintia greets him in a polished British accent, "Ciao, darling."

"Cintia, you are a vision this evening." He kisses both of her cheeks, European style, lingering.

Is there a vibe here? How scandalous! Or is he just one of those guys who flirts with everyone?

"Didn't want to leave this with the boy downstairs," She continues, walking past me and sliding a sleek leather briefcase onto the desk. They both laugh as if it's the funniest joke ever told. I don't get it. Evan remembers they aren't alone and gestures towards me.

"Cintia Ab El Malik, Jenna Stack. Jenna, Cintia."

Cintia steps closer, extending a perfectly manicured hand. A heady cloud of bergamot, cardamon and orchid wafts through the air. "A pleasure to meet you, Jenna."

"Jenna is here to walk Max," he adds.

My heart sinks. Suddenly, I feel like the help. Oh wait. I am. I nod and smile, jaw locked. Hi. I am the oh so average help who thought her employer might be flirting until you came along. Now I see how ridiculous that was. *What was I thinking?* "Weren't you in Vanity Fair this month? With a snake?" I blurt out.

"Yes." She lowers her eyes demurely, shakes her head and whispers conspiratorially, "Anything for a good cause," before turning to Evan. "Don't you dare forget the fete Saturday, dear. You'd never be forgiven!"

"Biggest event of the season. I couldn't possibly forget." They smile at each other knowingly. He sure does find her

amusing. “Time to go.” Evan abruptly switches back to all business. “I don’t want to be late to meet Abassi.”

“Give Adar my love,” Cintia says.

Max begins jumping up and spinning in a circle as I unroll the leash and attach the clip to his collar.

“Jenna, have you got any questions?”

“Nope. I think I’ve got it,” I say, pulling out the card Lloyd gave me. Evan scoops up the briefcase, adjusts his tie in the hall mirror and hustles us all out the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

Following Closely

Cintia barely has her hand in the air to hail a cab when two fight to stop in front of her. She climbs in and waves as Evan disappears around the corner.

Okay Max, it's just you and me. I check out the meticulously drawn map to Battery Park, drafted with A+ penmanship on the back of Evan's business card. I try to lead Max towards Broadway. The problem is, he isn't the least bit interested in heading that direction. I tug on his collar but he digs in his paws, yanking me East with all of his strength, panting and whining, and looking back at me with wide, earnest eyes. "Come on, boy. Don't you want to go to the park?" I ask in that special baby voice reserved for adorable pets and tiny people.

Max dances over to a hydrant, pees and yanks again. I give in. I know it's probably not smart to acquiesce this early in our relationship. But I'm new and temporary. And if the little guy prefers the urban landscape who the heck am I to deny him? He weaves back and forth, tangling me in his leash. I'm starting to see why Tony had trouble. I try

everything from stern commands to gentle coaxing, but it's like dealing with a tiny canine sailor who drank too much on leave. I finally figure out if I keep the leash short and walk with determination, he falls in line... kind of.

At the end of the block, Max turns the corner and hurries on, squat legs hustling. He seems to be on some sort of mission. Halfway down the block, I realize what it is. He's following his master. Evan is walking briskly ahead of us, briefcase in hand, headed towards an outdoor cafe. I observe two very attractive women blatantly check him out. He doesn't respond or even acknowledge them. Either he's used to the attention or he's clueless.

Evan approaches a dark skinned man with a bald head and neatly trimmed beard. He's wearing a gray suit with a red tie. A color coordinated handkerchief peeks out of his breast pocket. This must be Adar Abassi. He is seated, sipping from a tiny espresso cup, reading a newspaper. His posture is stiff and formal. He nods at Evan in greeting and stands up. "Okay boy, good dog. You've seen your daddy. Let's go." I tug, but Max strains at the leash. "What is it?" Max looks at me, ears up, panting, reaching in the direction of Evan. He starts to whine. I may not be a professional pet sitter, but I've spent enough time around animals to trust their instincts, sometimes even more than my own, and this dog is acting strange. "What's the problem, buddy?"

Looking around I notice a handsome, tough looking man in sunglasses and a suit talking to himself at the corner, twenty feet from the cafe. No phone, headphones or bluetooth. Weird. He glances right and I follow his gaze.

Another guy, heavy set, with pockmarked cheeks, in a blue sweatshirt and a Yankees baseball cap, nods. Are they talking to each other? Interesting. Evan and Abassi leave the cafe and sure enough, the two men follow. We learned about surveillance techniques last semester and these two are going by the book. Max jumps wildly and I let him pull me forward. As we follow I take out my phone and dial Evan's number.

Up ahead, he casually pulls out his phone, looks at the screen and puts it back in his pocket. Damn it. I don't answer phone numbers I don't recognize either. But I will from now on. Suddenly, the two men speed up behind Evan and Abassi. They all round the corner out of sight. Max is growling now and straining to get out of his collar. I follow, slowly and cautiously. I round the corner just in time to see the pursuer with the sunglasses force Evan and Abassi into an alley.

Crap! What should I do? Whatever's happening doesn't look good. I dial 911 and immediately get put on hold. Are you fucking kidding me? I inch toward the alley entrance and with one massive yank, Max pulls the leash out of my hand. "Max!" The dog isn't listening. His tiny legs are churning as he runs straight towards his master. I catch up, scoop Max up into my arms and crouch behind a trashcan at the mouth of the alley. Sunglasses is pointing a gun at Abassi who is on his knees clutching the briefcase. Evan is slumped against the alley wall. *Where's the other guy? The one with the hat?*

I'm looking around for something to throw, to make

noise, create a distraction when I'm grabbed from behind. The phone drops as Max flies out of my arms with a yelp.

A hand covers my mouth. It's him. The guy in the cap. He smells like cigarettes and sweat and his fingernails are dirty. He tries to shove me into the alley, away from the street. I try to think of anything I've learned or seen on TV. Bite. Poke out his eyes. Stomp on his foot. I can't get to his eyes so I bite down hard on his hand, then stomp his foot with the heel of my boot. I dig my nails into his forearm. Max is barking and growling, nipping at his legs. He slams me into the brick, scattering trash cans and ratchets up the pressure on my throat until I'm choking.

"Stupid bitch," he growls. What is that accent? I claw at him, ripping his sleeve open. His arm is covered in crudely rendered tattoos. I recognize a grim reaper and what looks like military braiding on his shoulder. This asshole sure likes ink, and choking women.

"Please! Take whatever you want. Just don't hurt us," Evan calls out. Max runs straight towards his master's voice, then leaps up into the air and clamps his jaws onto Sunglasses' gun arm. The weapon flies out of his hand, hits the ground with a loud clank, then slides across the alley to my feet. Good dog! In the commotion, I feel the grip on my neck loosen slightly. I take the opportunity to slam backwards against the wall as hard as I can and hear a whoosh of air being knocked out of my attacker's lungs. I wriggle loose and grab the gun.

"Back off," I scream, pointing the gun wildly as he's catching his balance. My hand is shaking. I can tell by the

smirk on his face, he's not convinced I know how to handle the weapon. He's right. I have no idea how to shoot the thing but I'm willing to try. I point the gun a little high and squeeze the trigger. Bricks explode over his shoulder, showering his cap with brick dust. I level the muzzle at his gut and in a serious tone say the first thing that comes to my mind, something I heard in a movie once. "I hear it's a slow way to die."

I don't think the mugger gets the reference but he takes me seriously. As he slowly raises his hands, I get a better look at him. He has an eight-pointed star inked just above his right knuckles. Under his bullish chin, a thick scar runs from the base of his left ear through the front of his throat.

"You bitch! I kill you," he shouts. Now I recognize the accent. He's Russian. Or maybe Ukrainian. I've heard it before when Liam and I went to get borscht in Brighton Beach, the Russian neighborhood.

"Move," I tell him, "towards your friend." The Russian starts backing away towards his partner. Sunglasses yanks the briefcase, trying to pull it away from Abassi who doesn't want to let go. I swing the gun to include him. "Drop it, or I'll shoot." I'm surprised at the determination in my voice and the steadiness of my hand. I point the gun directly at the muggers. "I'm not kidding."

Sirens blare and for the first time in my life, I am thrilled by the sound. Sunglasses lets go of the case, bolts and yells at his accomplice, "Forget it! Let's go!"

They run, but at the alley entrance, my attacker turns. He's had time to draw a heavy black gun. Abassi dives

towards Evan, lifting him off of his feet just as two shots are fired. They land on the ground like a couple of rag dolls, bouncing off the pavement, splayed and unhinged. The briefcase tumbles into an oily puddle. I run over to Evan. "Are you hit?"

He shakes his head, "I'm all right."

Abassi clutches his side and groans, a stunned expression on his face. He's been shot. Blood oozes out from under his hand. His fingers drip red. I've never seen someone get shot. It's not all slow motion. There's no music. It's just pop and done. The sirens are closing in as I struggle to find my cell phone. I pick it up and yell into the phone. "We need an ambulance! Send an ambulance!"

A sane, professional voice replies, "The police are on their way."

"And a God damn ambulance! Someone's been shot!"

Evan rushes over to Abassi. "Adar, are you all right? Adar?"

I kneel down. "Help me," I tell Evan as I peel away Abassi's coat and pull up his blood soaked shirt. He moans, then grimaces, fighting off the pain. It looks like the bullet hit him in the ribcage, but the blood is seeping, not pulsing which I'm pretty sure means it missed any major arteries. I take off my scarf and apply pressure to slow the bleeding.

Max is jumping on Evan, licking him and barking but Evan looks like he's in a trance.

"Are you okay?" I ask. Evan touches his hair and finds blood on his hand. He nods.

"Just hit my head. I'm okay. What about Adar?"

The mouth of the alley is filling up. A black and white cruiser, an ambulance, people jumping out and racing towards us, looky-loos peering in to see what's going on. I feel woozy.

Evan shakes his head with disbelief, finally registering what just happened, "Oh my God. He saved my life." He looks down at Abassi and takes his hand gently. "Hang in there, Adar."

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We are currently working on two follow up Jenna Stack Mysteries. Book #2 will be out later this year, followed by book #3 in 2017. If you'd like to receive an email when the next book is released, sign up for the Jenna Stack newsletter [here](#).

We both write individually also. Please visit our websites amyeyrie.com and alixsloan.com to learn more about us and our projects.

Have a great day!

Amy Eyrie & Alix Sloan