

Merger

Episode 1 by Luanna Stewart

Betty Lou slowed from a jog to a quick walk as she neared the boardroom. Even though she was late for the meeting there was no sense arriving out of breath. She stopped mid-stride when she heard a male voice. It wasn't her boss, whose whiny treble could barely be heard at the best of times. This new voice was deep and a bit husky. She'd heard this voice six months earlier, when she'd done something she'd never done before.

No, it couldn't be him. It was just the acoustics in the room, or something.

Finally the words being spoken penetrated her panic. "As I said earlier, there will be no layoffs with this acquisition, and my staff will do its best to integrate seamlessly with the organizational chart Mr. Wright has provided."

She pivoted on her flip-flops, ready to leave the building, get in her car, drive to her tiny apartment, and never emerge. But the deep, male voice continued, outlining all the positive aspects of his buying the company.

No, no, no. This couldn't be happening. She'd heard rumblings of Mr. Wright wanting to retire, and the possibility of selling the company, Wright & Sons, since there were no sons. Even if there were sons, Betty Lou doubted they'd want to stay in this tiny town making widgets no one wanted to buy.

She took a deep breath and sidled around the door, ready to learn her fate. Her hopes to slide unobtrusively into the nearest chair were dashed. Every damn chair was taken, and every damn face turned to study her, most of whom she'd never seen before.

Shit.

"Ah, you must be Ms. Smart." The tall Adonis who'd been speaking glanced at his watch and

raised a brow. “So glad you could join us. Here, take this seat.” He asked the glamorous redhead on his left to vacate her chair, and motioned for Betty Lou to approach.

Oh yeah, it was the same guy. The one she’d met at her best friend’s wedding. The one she’d danced with all night long. And the one she’d woken up entwined with the following morning.

With no choice, other than jumping out the nearest window, she rounded the table. Damn the man, he was just as handsome as she remembered, with his deep blue eyes and black hair. She knew she was either blushing or having a hot flash. She stumbled the last couple of feet and all but fell into the chair.

The room remained silent, every eye focused on her. Like they were expecting her to speak. She’d get through this meeting, and then start job hunting.

“Sorry I’m late. I had a phone call that just wouldn’t end. You know how that is.” She flashed a smile around the room inviting everyone to share in her executive problems. No one smiled. She tugged her short skirt as low on her thighs as she could and felt woefully underdressed. Thank God she’d decided to wear a bra under her white tank top.

A piece of paper was slid in front of her. She scanned the organizational chart. The good news was she still had a job. The less good news was she’d be reporting directly to the new boss, Holt Bastion. So that was his last name. They hadn’t gotten beyond first names before making love all frigging night.

She turned her head to find the gorgeous piece of man flesh staring at her. He didn’t seem to recognize her, thank goodness, so she’d brazen it out and act like they’d never met before. And do her best to forget *that night*. “Are you Mr. Bastion?”

He smiled, white teeth flashing, dimple appearing in his right cheek. Her heart fluttered and her girlie bits woke up. It seemed her body couldn’t forget *that night*.

“Call me Holt.” He shook her hand, and her nipples tightened. Thank God for the bra, otherwise everyone in the room would know she wanted to jump the guy right there on the table. “Nice to meet you.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice to a bedroom whisper. “Again.”

Episode 2 by C.A. Szarek

Holt was going to enjoy this.

Green eyes. Blonde hair full of natural waves. It was down, dancing around her shoulders. Rockin' body. He didn't even mind that she was inappropriately dressed for the acquisition meeting. Her white tank top was tight, stretched across her generous breasts. Her pale pink skirt was short, baring a hint of creamy thigh. She had rhinestones on her flip-flops and a bewildered expression on her beautiful face.

To be fair, Mr. Wright hadn't told his people they'd be there this morning. That had enraged Holt when he'd realized the small, but successful manufactures' employees would be blindsided.

He'd smooth things over, like he always did. No one was losing their jobs. He needed them, the experts in widgets for over thirty years. He'd be foolish to clean the place out.

Holt was more excited about this takeover than any of the others his company had done before. Because Betty Lou Smart worked *here*.

He was determined to have her in his bed again.

Her boss had called her *a sure bet*. According to the old man, she was a dream to work with, and ran the place.

Inappropriate thoughts dominated his mind. Holt had a damn good memory—of her screams when she came—and he was going to experience that again. Her body had trembled and her sex had clenched his. Like a glove. Like they were made for each other.

Someone cleared their throat and Holt had the uncharacteristic urge to jump. He and Betty Lou had been staring—at each other. He still had hold of her hand, so much smaller than his own, and his thumb had started to caress her soft skin of its own accord.

Dammit.

Holt ordered his fingers to release her, and forced his eyes to sweep the large room.

All eyes looked to him—as usual.

He smiled. Avoided Betty Lou’s gorgeous green gaze, too. “I’m glad everyone could join us this morning. As I was saying, there’s nothing to fear from Bastion Coastal Industries merging with Wright and Sons. This is an exciting opportunity for us all. I wanted to take this time to allay fears and answer questions. Our business plan is efficient and should make the transition as smooth as possible.” He turned things over to his business partner, Carina.

The willowy redhead could command a room as well as he could, and loved all eyes being on her.

Holt didn’t miss the glare she’d thrown his way when he’d kicked her out of the seat for Betty Lou, nor the look of mild contempt when he and his onetime lover had had their...moment.

He never should’ve slept with his partner. It’d been a onetime thing, too. She’d wanted more; he’d wanted to keep things professional.

Funny, he didn’t have that intention with Betty Lou Smart.

Carina’s portion of the meeting was all about bar and pie charts. Duties and job titles. Then they’d open things to questions.

Holt was prepared for everything. Even had the health insurance rep to answer the inevitable demands about medical benefits. Had the IRA people there, too. Pension and retirement were important, after all.

Problem was, he couldn’t concentrate on a damn thing, except the blonde woman sitting beside him.

Betty Lou was visibly uncomfortable. She fidgeted in the chair, avoided his gaze, and wasn’t paying attention to Carina’s speech. She tugged her skirt to her knees over and over, shifted her feet, crossed her legs, and uncrossed them several times.

Holt wanted to put his hands on her. Comfort her. Kiss her. He was driven to do so, in a way he’d

never been before. He studied her profile.

A delicious pink color started at her neck and crept upward, spreading across her high cheekbones.

Oh yeah, she knew he watched her.

His cock twitched and *he* had to resettle in his chair.

“Mr. Bastion.” Carina’s tone suggested she’d called his name more than once.

Fuck.

Holt jolted to his feet. Had to swallow hard.

“Do you want to open things to questions?” Carina’s full mouth was a hard line, and she spoke through clenched teeth.

Holt was in trouble. *Deep trouble.*

Episode 3: Caroline Lee

“I’m happy to meet with everyone personally this afternoon. For now, though, I’ll need Ms. Smart to meet me in Mr. Wright’s office immediately. We need to discuss the...merger.”

Betty Lou was almost certain that no one else had heard the slight pause between Mr. Bastion’s last two words. Those gorgeous blue eyes had pierced her when he’d said it, and she had found herself unable to draw in a full breath. The rest of the management team had filed out of the board room, completely at ease with the professional way their new boss had handled the meeting and the merger in general, leaving Betty Lou to wonder why she was the only one so affected by Mr. Bastion’s commanding presence.

She’d fled to her tiny office, and spent a good five minutes getting her breathing—and her raging arousal—under check. Then she remembered his demand that she meet with him, and cursed silently at the way she’d been dilly-dallying. Sure, they’d shared a kick-ass night together, and *oh God* just remembering the way he could use his tongue made her knees weak. But that history was no reason to think that he wanted anything from her except a professional and efficient manager-boss relationship.

So now she stood outside Mr. Wright’s office, the office where she’d sat through countless widget-making discussions, wondering at Mr. Bastion’s brazen move to commandeer it. She knocked timidly, and from within came that deep, masterful voice: “Come in, Ms. Smart.”

She swallowed, forced herself to push open the door, and stepped inside.

He was sitting in Mr. Wright’s chair, completely at ease behind another man’s desk. Unbelievably, he’d gotten sexier somehow, and more imposing. As the door shut behind her, he came to his feet and rounded the desk towards her.

Betty Lou took a step back, feeling her heart speed up in response to the way he held her with that

powerful gaze. She remembered his hands, strong and dominating, on her skin, and had to tamp down a delicious shudder.

“The rest of your co-workers will be meeting me here in an hour, Ms. Smart.” Betty Lou nodded hesitantly. *So why am I here alone, now?* “But you and I have some business to attend to, first.”

She forced herself to nod. “Mr. Wright put most of the HR into my hands, sir. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll grab my laptop to go over—”

And then he was in front of her, and she apparently forgot how to speak. Tilting her head back to stare up at him, her tongue flicked out to lick suddenly-dry lips, and his curled into a sexy little grin that promised... something. What?

“The former owner told me all sorts of things about your place here in the company, Ms. Smart.”

Betty Lou swallowed, sure her voice couldn’t raise above a whisper. “Yes, sir.”

“And I have a wonderful memory of the evening after Chris and Diane’s wedding.” Betty Lou would’ve groaned and turned away in embarrassment, but knew it would be a mistake to drop his masterful gaze. “I’ve purchased the company, and therefore your services. Mr. Wright spoke highly of you as his ‘right-hand woman’, and I’d like to keep you in that... position.”

Position. There were all sorts of positions she would like to find herself in with this man, again. Just his voice was conjuring up memories of the way he’d commanded her to take him in her mouth, or to climb up on the bed on all fours. She’d done things that night she’d never imagined doing before... and *loved them.*

So she said what she knew he wanted to hear. “Yes, sir.”

That smile again, and he took a step back. “Good. I’m glad we understand each other.”

She couldn’t decide if she was desperate to escape the office, and have the chance to tamp down on her arousal, or if she wanted to wrap her arms around him right now and beg him to let her kiss him.

But he wouldn’t let her make the decision herself. Crooking a finger, he beckoned her closer to the

desk and moved to settle down behind it once more.

“Now, since you’re here to discuss your future, let’s see what you can do to convince me of your value. Remember that I’m your new boss, now, and if you want to keep your *position* in my company, you’ll need to say what I want to hear.”

And so, her pulse beating loudly in her ears, Betty Lou sucked in an excited breath, imagination running wild. “Yes, sir, Mr. Bastion.”

Episode 4 by Lena Hart

The bastard had some nerve.

Carina Stone continued to pace her office, still seething at Holt Bastion's earlier callousness. The bastard had the nerve to demand *she* give up her seat for some tank-top wearing, late arriving office manager. In front of their new employees, no less!

Carina hated when Holt did that—hated his arrogance and the way he had fawned over Wright's "Golden Girl."

But most of all, Carina hated that she had let Holt Bastion see her naked.

Of all the men to have her first drunken one-night stand with, she had to pick her long-time business partner. She didn't have much life regrets, but that night she most certainly did. Going to bed with Holt had been a huge mistake. Not only had he'd gotten it in his head that she had wanted more from him after that night, but their professional relationship had suffered for it.

Now he was treating her like some assistant instead of the partner who had helped shaped Bastion Coastal Industries into the company it was today. It had taken *both* of their hard work and tenacity to build BCI, and Carina would be damned if she let their one-time screw ruin her career or her plans for their company.

With a frustrated sigh, Carina stopped her useless pacing and leaned against her desk. Covering her face with her hands, she began counting down from ten.

Eight...seven...six...

She had to rein in her temper if she was going to get through the rest of the day. Holt may be an arrogant ass, and Wright & Sons may be a small-town company, but she had worked her ass off to make this merger happen. *No one* was going to take that accomplishment away from her.

Four...three...two...

“Ms. Stone?”

Carina’s head jerked up at the deep, baritone voice and her gaze clashed with the most striking sea-green eyes she had ever seen. Framed against thick, dark-brown eyebrows, they were...hypnotizing. The man’s short, stylishly cropped blond hair and expensive suit had the look of someone comfortable with spending lots of money on himself.

This was no country bumpkin.

He also wasn’t an employee of Wright & Sons. There was no way she would have missed him around the small company office.

Carina was now intrigued. Cocking her head to the side, she studied the stranger as closely as he was admiring her. Only a blind fool would turn away from such exquisiteness and she was neither. Yet, as much as she admired such perfection in a man, she wasn’t the fawning type.

“How did you get pass security?”

The man lips curved in a way that made her think of tangled sheets and thrusting hips, but he held out his hand and said in that deep, sexy voice of his, “My name is Lance Burnham. Phillip Wright is my father.”

Carina frowned as his words slowly registered and absently slipped her hand into his. There was surprising strength in that well-groomed hand and she quickly pulled away from his lingering hold.

“We weren’t informed of any living sons of Mr. Wright,” Carina said, not bothering to keep the suspicion from her tone.

“That’s not surprising. I’m the Wright family’s dirty little secret, but it was my grandfather who saw to it that Wright & Sons is passed on to the next living son on the day of my father’s seventieth birthday. That day was yesterday. Since I’m the only surviving heir that makes me the new beneficiary to Wright & Sons.”

“Well, you’re too late. My business partner and I have legally acquired Wright & Sons and the merger has already been finalized.”

Something dangerous flashed in the man’s pale green eyes. “My apologies if you didn’t receive the memo, Ms. Stone. These things tend to become less fluid in small town companies such as this. But as of today, my father is no longer the majority holder of Wright & Sons. I am. And that includes Bastion Coastal Industries. Consider this a hostile takeover.”

Episode 5 by Kishan Paul

Betty Lou stared at the chair Holt motioned her toward as the weight of his words sunk in. The desire she'd felt for the man just seconds ago chilled, turning into a tidal wave of anger.

Convince him of her value? If she wanted to keep her position? He expected her to beg for her job. Her face heated with emotion. She'd stayed in this little East Texas town longer than intended because of Mr. Wright's wife. Put her own dreams on hold to help the woman she now considered a second mother to her. In all that time, no one had ever questioned her worth or contribution to the company. It was understood and appreciated.

She tugged at her short pink skirt. Well, okay so she wasn't dressed the part of a hot shot like the redhead in the boardroom, but Betty Lou knew her own value. Now that Mr. Wright no longer ran the company, there was no reason she couldn't follow her dreams.

Holt cleared his throat, reminding her he was waiting for her to sit and to beg for her job. She rolled her shoulders back, and took a seat. The sexy lion in front of her needed to be schooled.

Betty Lou rested her elbows on the arm rest of her chair, leaned forward, and stared into his deep blue eyes. "Mr. Bastion, when I came to Wright & Sons eight years ago, the company had the highest employee turnover rate in Hawkins." She waved at the laptop sitting on his desk. "If you look at the HR reports you'll see that since I've taken over the department, widget production has tripled and employee turnover has been cut in half."

The muscles in his jaw twitched. Was he fighting a laugh? "But to be honest, I really don't need to explain myself to you. My loyalty was to Mr. Wright and his family. Now that they aren't running the company anymore, I have no reason to stay."

Holt's brows rose.

Betty Lou flashed him a satisfied grin and rose from her seat. “I leave an impact no matter where I go Mr. Bastion. I suggest you start looking for my replacement soon. You’re going to find it’s hard to replace me.”

In her usual graceless manner, she tripped on her flip flops as she tried to make her exit. By the time she righted herself, grabbed the knob, and turned it, he was behind her using his muscular arm to keep the door closed. Betty Lou started to protest, but lost her voice when she noticed how close his body was to hers. She shuttered her lids, trying to shake off the hunger stirring inside her. When she sucked in a calming breath, it was filled with the scent of his woody cologne. The bundle of muscles between her legs clenched without her permission.

“You’re right,” he whispered, inching closer until his lips almost touched her ear. “You do leave an impact.”

Betty Lou stood frozen, savoring the heat of his breath against her skin. He had given her the best sex she’d ever had. How many lust-filled nights had she spent aching for him?

“Six months,” he said as if reading her thoughts. “I’ve spent the last six months trying to shake off the effect you’ve had on me. And you know why I haven’t been able to?” Holt twisted the latch on the door, locking it. “Because you’re right, you’re irreplaceable.”

All resolve to walk out of his office gone, Betty Lou turned to face her desires. Their eyes locked and the hunger she saw in his made her brave. She reached up and ran her fingers up the back of his neck into his hair. He inched his face close. Just as his lips brushed against hers, the door she leaned against rattled.

Episode 6 by JA Coffey

“Bastion! Where the hell are you?” A muffled female voice hollered from the hall.

“Hey...ooof!” Betty Lou gasped as the door rattled and burst open, thrusting her curvaceous body into his arms with such force they both lost their balance for a moment.

At least, he told himself it was the force of her trajectory and not the fact that he'd been imagining her in his arms every night for the past six months. Every night since he'd buried himself inside a body, heart and soul made for loving. As Betty Lou's softly rounded curves made contact with his chest, a wave of arousal shuddered through his body, almost drowning out the furious shriek from the now open doorway where his ex-lover seethed.

“In here,” he said calmly. His arms tightened a fraction around Betty Lou as if he could protect her from Carina's ire.

Under the cheap office fluorescent lights, his ex-lover glared at him, her hands splayed over her hips. One toe of her stiletto tapped the gray commercial carpet as if she could jackhammer through to the concrete underlayment of this one-horse town. He almost wished she could. That he and Betty Lou could slip away unnoticed and he could whisk her away and finish what they'd started the night of the wedding.

Carina's eyes cut from Holt to the beautiful blonde in his arms and back, and her lips compressed. Just over her shoulder, an unfamiliar man with light green eyes hovered, his sardonic face masking a smile. “When you're finished playing ‘casting couch’, I think there's something you should hear.”

“No one is playing anything in here.” Betty Lou turned, but stayed within the circle of his arms, he noted.

Carina raised an elegant brow. “Could’ve fooled me.” There was an edge to her voice so sharp; Holt was surprised to find he wasn’t bleeding. Jeez, they’d spent one night together. Why was the woman acting like a possessive cat in heat?

Betty Lou tugged the strap of her tank top into place and edged out of his arms, her chin raised. “Actually, I was just about to leave.”

“Give it a rest, Carina. No one is going anywhere.” His fingers itched to touch Betty Lou, to draw her back into his arms. Instead, he straightened his tie. The office was unaccountably hot. “What seems to be the problem?”

“The problem, Bastion, is that you are no longer the owner of your own company,” Carina spat. Her dark eyes flashed as she jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “This guy says he owns all of us.” Holt’s fists clenched. The man in the hall was more than smirking, now. He waved some very official looking papers in the stifling office building.

“I’m afraid so. Sorry.” The man didn’t appear the least bit afraid or sorry. His pale eyes offered a challenge, one that Holt was all too ready to accept.

“You’re going to be if you think you can take me.” A muscle in Holt’s jaw twitched.

The buzzing of the fluorescent lights droned like summer wasps overhead. No way in hell was Holt Bastion going down in this backwoods nowhere Texas town. Not here, not now, and sure-as-shit not in front of Betty Lou.

Not if he had anything to say about it.

Episode 7 by Luanna Stewart

Betty Lou stepped away from Holt. She needed to think, and standing so close to male perfection made it damn near impossible to think about anything other than sex. And more sex.

“What’s going on, Lance? What are you doing here?”

“You know this guy?” Holt all but growled, like he and the other man were two dogs in a standoff over a bone, or a bitch.

Lance pushed passed the red head. “She sure does. She knows me real good. We were going to get married, weren’t we, Betty-Betty-Lou-Lou.”

She clenched her fists. How many times had she told him she didn’t like that nickname? And still the jerk insisted on using it, in that sing song way. Hard to believe she’d been a few weeks from marrying him.

“But then, about six months ago,” Lance tweaked her nose, yet another habit of his she’d tried to break, “my fiancé went off to a friend’s wedding.” He turned to Holt, a slimy smirk on his face. “When she came back she’d decided she didn’t want to get married anymore. I wonder why that was.”

“Lance, we’ll discuss this later. Tell me what you’re doing here *now*. You said you didn’t want to have anything to do with this, and I quote, toy company.”

“Situations change, sugar lump. As you well know. One minute you’re engaged to be married, and the next you’re not. One minute you’re the owner of a company,” he winked at Holt, “and the next you don’t have two pennies to rub together.”

Holt took a step forward but Betty Lou grabbed his arm. She knew from personal experience that both men were strong and fit. Her cheeks heated. Holy crap, she was in the room with the only two men she’d ever slept with.

“There must be a mix-up.” She turned to Holt and met his gaze. His eyes smouldered, but it had nothing to do with what they’d been discussing earlier. This wasn’t a “let’s get dirty” look, this was a “I’m going to kill this guy” look. “We should all sit down and discuss this rationally.”

“No need.” Lance slapped the papers he held. “It’s all here in black and white, Betty-Betty-Lou-Lou. Your—ah—boss screwed up, didn’t do due diligence, and now he owns squat. I’m your boss.” He shoved Holt aside and sat behind the large desk, stroking the scarred top. “Well, former boss. Because you’re fired.”

“We’re not done here, Lance. I’ll be back.” Holt stormed from the room, punching at his cell phone as he walked. The redhead scampered in his wake.

Betty Lou waited a few seconds, then hurried to her office. She had access to all the company files. Somewhere there had to be information she could use to get Lance out of the company. He would just bleed it dry, and she couldn’t let that happen.

Holt was another problem. She didn’t like the idea of his being her boss, but she also didn’t like the idea of never seeing him again. Never touching or kissing him again.

The man of her dreams stepped into her office and shut the door. “Carina has run back to the city. I know you probably don’t like me right now but I need your help.”

She took a deep breath. Decision time.

Episode 8 by C.A. Szarek

Holt shut down the *what the fuck* swirling around in his head. His cock was still too-interested in Betty Lou's short pink skirt—not to mention the way her breasts had felt smashed against his chest, but he had bigger—real—problems to worry about.

He cursed and slammed his phone in his pocket. Then shot his business partner a glance. “Danvers is waiting for you. I’m going to see Betty Lou. She can help.”

Mick Danvers led their team of attorneys—the best money could buy. He’d probably storm right over to Wright & Sons. No doubt the guy would take this ridiculous assault personally. He’d worked for hours on the legal prep of the merger, instead of assigning it to an associate. They’d been college buddies and Mick himself usually handled most of BCI’s acquisitions—not just the big ones.

“How the hell is *she* going to help?” Carina snarled.

“Carina,” Holt growled. “Go.”

“You bet I will. *I’ll* get Danvers, since you’re too busy playing—”

He cut her off. Holt couldn’t deal with her petty jealousies at the moment. “Go to headquarters. I’ll fax you the paperwork as soon as I read it.”

Carina stomped down the hallway in her silver stilettos.

Holt hurried to his former lover’s office and slipped inside. She was already working on her computer, but looked up over her shoulder to welcome him.

He forbade his eyes from studying her breasts and staring at the portion of her creamy thigh that was bared, since she was sitting at her desk.

The efficient metal workstation was against the wall in the corner and she sat on the side closest to him. He could see more of her body than he should—considering the circumstances.

“Records. I need to see them. Can you do that?” Holt cleared his throat, and his head because one glance at the pinkness that extended over Betty Lou’s exposed collarbones and cleavage plummeted most of his brain cells down south again.

So much for christening my new desk with the woman of my dreams.

Shit had hit the fan instead.

“Already on it,” she told him. “Be with you in minute to go over everything.”

“Thanks.” Holt took a seat and got to reading the stack of paper’s *whatshisface*, his woman’s ex had slammed down on the desk.

Her fingers were tapping over her keyboard at fifty miles an hour. Occasionally he’d hear her printer getting a workout, and Betty Lou would grab papers and start organizing intermittently, but Holt didn’t look up from the asinine orders in his hands.

The more he read, the more his ire burned. He tugged at his collar and loosened his tie to keep his head from exploding. “This bastard.”

“I know...” Betty Lou whispered.

“He’s Wright’s son?” Holt barked. His gaze collided with Betty Lou’s gorgeous green eyes, they were as wide as saucers.

“No. He’s not.”

Holt pointed to the paperwork, read the few lines out loud, then showed it her. He stuck his finger under the offensive wording and poked hard enough to rip the sheet. “That’s what it declares here.”

“No. It just can’t be.” Betty Lou shook her head. “He...he was adopted. He never knew his birth parents.”

Her office door swung open, and Lance Burnham filled Betty Lou’s doorframe, as if they’d summoned the bastard.

“What are you still doing here?” he barked.

Holt wanted to punch the smug smirk off the asshole's face. He stood, clutching the legal paperwork to his side, so he wouldn't do just that.

"Maybe you didn't hear me, Betty-Betty-Lou-Lou, but I fired you. And you—" he glared at Holt, "need to get the hell off my property."

"Listen here, you bas—"

Betty-Lou's small hand appeared on his chest, cutting off his words. "Holt, we'll just go," she whispered. She looked at Lance Burnham. "I heard you just fine, let me get my things."

"You will do no such thing. Trying to take my proprietary information, no doubt." The asshole glanced over his shoulder, then slid out of the doorway. "Security, I need your assistance."

Episode 9 by Caroline Lee

“There’s no need to be rude, Lance, we’re going.” Betty Lou all but pushed Holt out the door, past the new owner of Wright & Sons.... who apparently was one of said sons. “But,” she glared up at her ex, knowing that he wouldn’t be fooled by any of her sickly sweet smiles, “I’m taking my laptop.”

He tried to grab her arm when she pivoted back towards the desk to rip the charger from the wall, and she could tell that he was going to object. “*My* laptop, Lance. Your ‘father’ made me buy it myself, and I’m taking it with me.” Nose in the air, electronics tucked under her arm, purse slung across her shoulder so it bumped against her ass with each step, she flip-flopped past him with as much dignity as she could muster.

To her surprise, Holt was waiting for her at the elevator, looking like he was seriously considering going back in there to duke it out with Lance over the company. But instead, he just latched on to her elbow and hustled her into the elevator. Since that’s where she was planning on going anyhow, eager to get out of the building before Lance caught her in her lie or called their one elderly security guard to make a scene, she went quietly.

The ride was awkward, Holt’s dangerous silence a warning to not try to make conversation. But when the doors *dinged* open to reveal the lowest level of the parking garage, Holt took a deep breath and turned to her, touching her arm gently with the hand not still holding the papers. “This isn’t right, Betty Lou. I need to fix this.”

“No.” She lifted the laptop just a little bit, to draw his attention to it. “*We* need to fix this. And we need to get out of here before we can’t.”

Giving her a look she couldn’t interpret, he finally nodded. “We’ll make a good team.”

She tried not to think about how good that—him calling them as a team—made her feel.

Holt had arrived with Carina, who'd already taken the car back to the city, so they squeezed into her old Ford Ranger. Holt had raised a dark brow at the messy interior of the small pickup, but pushed some piles of newspaper to the floorboards and climbed in.

As she peeled out of the garage—a small part of her smiling to see him grab at the ‘*oh shit*’ handle when she took the corner too hard—she caught him staring at her.

“What?”

“I didn’t say anything.” She didn’t look, but could hear the smile in his voice.

“Open the computer,” She’d plopped it on his lap with the rest of the papers he’d been carrying when they left the office. “And go into the ‘Legal Files’ folder under ‘Wright’ in the document drive.”

“I like this side of you. Very commanding.” But he did as she asked.

“Yeah, well.” She ran a yellow to turn left on Harbor Ave. “I have hidden depths.”

“I can tell.” She could hear that smile again. Then a moment of silence as he tapped her way through Wright and Son’s legal documents. “I can’t believe Mr. Wright let you store all of these on your personal computer.”

“He didn’t.” She felt his gaze, and smiled. It wasn’t a nice smile. “I just stole Wright and Sons proprietary property.”

He chuckled then. “Well, let’s see if we can justify your larceny.” When he bent back over the screen, and she took a slower right onto Maple towards downtown, she realized that she was a lot calmer than she had a right to be. She’d been fired, stolen a laptop from her long-time employer, and seen her ex destroy a good man. But being beside Holt, working with him, just felt *right*.

But then she heard him suck in a breath. “Holy shit, Betty Lou.” She glanced at him, but he didn’t notice. “Burnham’s documents said that his grandfather arranged it so that he’d inherit on his father’s seventieth birthday, because he’s the last surviving son.” It’d always bothered Betty Lou how obsessed the old man had been with his sons, ignoring his daughters.

Holt looked up, and she met his brilliant blue eyes for a moment, struck by the predatory gleam in them. “That’s a lie.”

Episode 10 by Lena Hart

She really didn't have time for this shit.

Carina's grip tightened around her cellphone as she kept her gaze trained on the road ahead. "Holt, would you make up your mind. I thought you wanted me to get to Mick right away. What changed?"

"There's no time to get into it now, but trust me. It's big."

"But Holt—"

"Damn it, Carina. I said, trust me. Now I'm going to call the sheriff's office. Just meet us back at the office."

Carina gritted her teeth and ended the call with Holt. She made a quick U-turn and headed back to the office. Whatever Holt had discovered about Lance Burnham had to be big. He wouldn't tell her what it was over the phone, but it was serious enough for him to forego their initial plan to talk to their lawyer and instead return back to confront the man. With the sheriff, no less?

What the hell is going on?

She blew out a frustrated breath. It was days like this that she wanted to walk away from it all and open that yoga studio in Houston. But then she thought about all the work she'd put into BCI and Holt's arrogance that made him think he'd done it all on his own, and she knew she couldn't give in easily.

Carina made it to the small office building of Wright & Sons and was pleasantly surprised to find her badge still active. She hurried to her office, acutely aware of the lack of people around the office.

Where was everybody?

It wasn't long for Carina to discover what had happened to everyone. The memo on her desk said it all. It appeared everyone at Wright & Sons/Bastion Coastal Industries had been terminated. Effective immediately. Carina crushed the letter in her palm.

The bastard.

And to think she'd found that son-of-bitch Lance Burnham remotely attractive.

“Carina Marie Stone, you can sure pick ‘em.” She shook her head in disgust. Between Lance Burnham and Holt Bastion, she had horrific taste in men.

Carina, however, would be damned if she let either men screw with her career.

She marched to Holt's office, ready to confront the bastard that was not only trying to destroy what she'd worked hard to achieve, but who had also just screwed over so many hardworking employees in the process. She pushed the door to the large office open, but what she walked into was a sight that surprised her into a halt.

“What are you doing?”

Lance glanced up from the papers he was shredding and cursed. He straightened and rounded the desk toward her.

Still stunned, Carina glanced around the now cluttered office and stared pointedly at the piles of shredded documents. “What the hell is all this?”

Lance followed her gaze then turned back to her, his pale green eyes becoming as cold as the Arctic. “What is it with you people?” Without warning, he pulled a semi-automatic from the back of his waistband and Carina's stomach dropped. “What part of hostile takeover don't you get?”

She threw her hands up, terror causing her legs to tremble as she kept her eyes trained on the fierce looking gun in his hands. “Have you lost your damn mind?”

Lance shrugged. “Maybe. Guess that's what happens when you have parents who don't want you and a bitch of a fiancée who cheats on you weeks before your wedding. Hard to care about anything when you have nothing left to lose.” He waved the gun toward her. “Now get in here and shut the damn door.”

Episode 11 by Kishan Paul

Holt sat in the living room of Mr Wright's eight acre ranch fiddling with Betty Lou's car keys. Wright's daughter, Theresa, was seated across from him, crying her eyes out. Betty Lou sat beside her holding the woman's hand and glaring at Holt all at the same time.

He nodded and put the keys on the table and tried to act like he wasn't in a rush. Like the future of the company didn't solely rest on the shoulders of the woman in front of him who, for the past ten minutes, had done nothing but cry.

"How did you find out?" Theresa asked after she blew her nose.

Guilt flashed across Betty Lou's face. "Your father kept a copy of all your medical records, including the delivery, on his computer. When he asked for me to get copies of his health documents, I accidentally scanned your files too."

He fought the urge to smile. The little sex machine was a damn good liar.

Theresa nodded. "It was bound to come out. I was fifteen and dumb. Lance wouldn't have had a chance at a good life if I'd kept him, I knew that much. It's why when Daddy said we should give him away, I didn't argue. As hard as Daddy was on me all these years, can you imagine how things would have turned out if I'd kept the baby?"

Holt leaned forward and listened as Betty Lou questioned the woman. "So why let your Daddy's sister adopt him instead of a stranger?"

She shrugged. "That way I could still be in his life."

Betty Lou handed her a new Kleenex. "But you never told him the truth?"

"I wanted to so many times but Daddy wouldn't let me." Her voice trailed off as a new set of sobs took over.

Betty Lou hugged the woman. “That must have been hard for you.”

The older blonde nodded. “It was and Lance was different. He didn’t want Aunt Linda or Momma or even me, just Daddy. The one person who would never love him. ”

Holt cleared his throat, he was going in for the kill. “Theresa, what if you told him now? What if you could still help him?”

Holt stopped at the empty receptionist desk, savouring the excitement flowing through his veins. He scanned the space. The whole building was empty, complements of the asshole. But he was about to change all that.

He pulled out Betty Lou’s laptop and reviewed the email he’d composed for the legal team one final time. A smile of satisfaction stretched across his face as he hit send. This company was solidly BCI’s and no one would ever tell him to leave again. Lance Burnham was about to have his ass thrown into the nearest dumpster and Holt planned on doing the honors.

He slid the laptop into the bottom drawer of the desk and rushed to catch up with the two women he brought with him. Betty Lou had a hand wrapped around Theresa’s elbow, guiding her down the hall. He knew Betty Lou well enough to know the hand was there to reassure and calm the other woman, and from the looks of it, it was working.

She was impressing him more and more by the second. Her brain, her wit. Then there was the way her hips swayed when she walked, like they currently did. From the first time he laid eyes on her to now, she kept making things hard for him. Once this mess was cleaned up, he had every intention of stripping her out of that tight pink fabric covering her ass and...

He shook the thoughts from his head and walked faster. First things first, he needed to throw out the trash.

Holt felt a slight twinge of pity for Lance. The sad thing was Holt would have helped the guy out, even given him a job at the company if Lance had handled it the right way. But he hadn't and the man needed to be stopped.

Now.

Holt maneuvered past the women and headed for the office he would again claim as his own. He opened the door and froze.

Lance leaned against the edge of the desk a few feet in front of Holt. He had a gun pointed at Carina while she sat in the office chair working on the computer. "It looks like the MVP's come back to play. Come in. Maybe you can help Redhead Barbie over here with a little project."

Holt stepped in and shut the door behind him and hoped the gunman hadn't noticed Betty Lou and Theresa behind him in the hall.

His mind raced as he scanned Carina for injuries. Their eyes locked and when he shot her a questioning look, she shook her head, letting him know she wasn't hurt.

He took a step closer and stared down the man in front of him. "What do you want from her? You already got the company."

Lance laughed and shook his head. "Everything."

Holt sized him up, trying to judge if the man really was crazy enough to kill. Before he could finish, the door to the office slammed into his back, pushing him forward.

He used the force of the door and lunged onto Lance, grabbing the hand holding the gun. In one quick twist, he had the weapon flipped over pointed at the gunman. Lance screamed in pain as his finger and wrist bent in unnatural directions seconds before the gun fired.

THE END

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