

PRT 369- "Damage Control"

The night at the studio with Michelle was amazing. I was so happy to be able to see her in the midst of all this craziness surrounding the two of us. As I got closer to the house though, a rock settled in my stomach. I wasn't looking forward to this at all. I hoped I could find a way through this.

I arrived home to an angry wife. That wasn't so surprising. Dot had been angry ever since the news about Michelle and I broke. The only difference? Now she was ready to talk.

I casually walked into the kitchen where Dot was fixing breakfast for the kids. The second she saw me she started throwing things around. I went to the refrigerator and fixed a glass of orange juice as she continued to slam pots and pans around. Finally I had enough. I finished my juice and threw the glass in the sink, breaking it. Dot whirled on me.

"Go ahead and break everything in the house! You've already broken our home enough times!" she shrieked. I backed out of her way as she gathered the shards of glass to throw them in the trash.

"Dammit!" she yelled.

"What is it?" I asked sweetly, not wanting to infuriate her further. She glared at me.

"I cut myself" she said angrily.

I held my hand out to her. It was like extending an olive branch. I hoped she would give in and we could talk about this. She looked from my hand to my face a couple times and finally gave me her cut finger to look at. It wasn't a bad cut, just enough to piss her off. I grabbed a paper towel and wrapped it around her finger, then kissed it.

"There" I said, "are you ready to talk now?"

She thought for a few seconds. "Yeah, I guess so..... Oh! The eggs are burning."

"Well, that's what you get for cooking while you're angry" I said, temporarily off the hook. She threw the burnt eggs out and shrugged.

"I guess it's toaster strudels again". I took her hand and led her to the living room. We sat on the couch.

"Look, I've been putting this off and I know you haven't wanted to hear it. But, the allegations about Michelle and I are completely false. We haven't been seeing each other. I promise Dot. I don't want to hurt you again."

She seemed to consider what I said for a moment. This was a good sign. Then she shook her head. "But, the pictures Jon. How...?"

The question hung in the air. I knew that this was coming, but I wasn't really prepared to address it. Of course I knew they were real, but how could I convince her otherwise?

"The pictures are nothing more than a dirty prank. My guess is that they were spliced together by someone who's good at photo editing. They look real, I know. I've been trying to figure it out myself. But, I promise you, they're not real. The press has put out hurtful things before. This is just another thing that they think they've found out and they're having a field day with it. Nothing more."

Only then did I realize I how nervous I was. The weight of her hand in mine brought the gravity of the situation home even more than I had ever thought it would. I could really lose her. I could lose everything. My wife, my family, even my home. She searched my eyes for the truth. Apparently she found what she was looking for. She nodded.

"Ok. I'll trust you this time. But if anything more believable comes out in the press, I swear I will have your ass on a platter"

I nodded. "Ok...thank you for trusting me. I don't want to lose you baby". I kissed her on the forehead. The kind of kiss that said 'I'm not going anywhere'. Just then Steph and Jess came downstairs. Steph wrinkled her nose.

"It smells terrible down here" she said.

I smiled. "Yeah, your mom burned breakfast" I said. Her nose stayed wrinkled as she looked at me.

"Oh, you're finally home. Late night at the studio again, daddy?" she asked sarcastically.

"Actually, yes"

She shook her head. "You know, you're not fooling anyone. We all know what's going on with you and Michelle. You can't hide it anymore. There are pictures now"

"Well, your father says that the pictures aren't real. Anyone could have fabricated them" Dot said.

"Yeah, they're not real sweetie. Someone is just trying to hurt our family"

Steph rolled her eyes. "Whatever...I don't believe that. But you can if you want to, mom"

Jess finally spoke up. "If Dad says they're fake, then maybe they are"

"Yeah, fat chance. I knew he was going to go back to her just as soon as he could. How many times are you going to do this to us?" She started crying.

I sighed. I sat next to her on the couch and put my arm around her. "Look, the photos are fake. I'm not seeing Michelle. Any time I do see her is purely professional"

"You shouldn't see her at all" Jess said, "she's trouble. She's always been trouble. You shouldn't agree to do any professional work with her, period...for the sake of your family"

I nodded. I knew that it would come down to this and I was prepared to deal with it. I just didn't expect it from Jess. "I have a contract. If my label asks me to do a duet or a tour or a video or anything with Michelle, then I am bound to honor that request. But if that does happen again, I invite all of you to come to the studio or tour or shoot or whatever with me if you feel that I need a babysitter. My label allows us to live the lifestyle that we live. I can't compromise that over the media's constant need and ability to blow things out of proportion."

Jess rolled his eyes this time. "Whatever Dad...I'm just sick of the crap our family has to go through all the time."

"Me too" I said.

"Then why are you still friends with her?" Steph asked.

"I've known her a long time, you know that...and if I recall she's the one you called when you ran away." I pointed out.

"Yeah, I like Michelle but I don't try to replace Mom with her."

"I'm not trying to replace your mother. This family means everything to me."

"Dad, come on, we're not stupid. I can spot photoshopped pictures. Those are clearly real." Jess said.

"Oh? So you're a photo expert now? I've seen some really good photoshopping." I pointed out.

"Mom, do you seriously buy this?"

"I trust your father sweetheart. He loves us and he wouldn't risk everything for her...not again." Dot said.

"He's done it before!"

"I do not want to go through another divorce." Steph said.

"We're not getting a divorce again." I said.

"Not yet anyway." Jess mumbled.

"I'm serious. I'm not seeing Mich. Now, any other questions?"

"No, I guess not."

"So, are we all past this now?" I asked.

Dot smiled and nodded. Steph and Jess both rolled their eyes, but then nodded. I was in the clear. For now anyway.

"OK kids, go get your brothers dressed. Breakfast is ready." Dot said as she heard the toaster timer.

I sat at the breakfast table and watched my kids eat. I was so incredibly torn. I loved my kids and my wife. I didn't want to lose them for anything, but something about Michelle just drew me in. I didn't want to lose her either...I'd waited so long to have another shot with her and this was it.

"I'm taking the boys swimming today." Dot said snapping me from my thoughts.

"OK. I have work to do in the office. I have a lot of work to do with the book coming out in a couple of months." I said.

"OK. Steph, Jess, what are your plans?" Dot asked.

"Steph is going to drop me off at the mall." Jess said.

"And where are you going Steph?"

"Library. I had an idea for a new dress design but I need to get some books to help me get the layering right." Steph replied.

"OK, well that means you'll have the house to yourself. You should be able to get a lot of work done." Dot said.

I nodded, "I should go get started. I'll see you at dinner."

I went to my office and closed the door. I logged on to Myspace. I had a message from Michelle:

Jon,

These last few weeks with you have been amazing. I loved every moment of being with you...but being together shouldn't be this hard. I know you love your family very much and I can let you risk everything for me again. I'm sorry but we can't see each other outside of business anymore. I do love you but there is no safe way to be together anymore. The

leak has made sure of it and I know that she won't stop until she's destroyed me and if you're involved with me she'll bring you down too. I can't let that happen to you. I love you way too much. I've caused more than enough trouble for you. I hope we can find a way to still be friends. I'm sorry for everything.

*Always,
Michelle*

Oh god...I couldn't lose her again. I'd gone through so much to get her back in my life. The idea of losing her was too much to take. I knew she was trying to do the right thing but I had to convince her that being with me was right... because it was. I clicked 'reply' and quickly typed:

Michi,

Please don't do this to me. You know that we can't just be friends. I talked to Dot. She somehow bought my BS about the pictures. Steph and Jess are still a bit skeptical I think, but they want their mother to be happy, so they're leaving it alone for now. I know that we can find a way to be together without hurting my family in the process. There has to be a way. I will always fight for you baby. Please don't do this to me. Please don't leave me again...

I clicked 'send' just as there was a knock on the door.

"Come in" I said.

Rich, my best friend and guitar player, walked in, "Hey man, are you ok?"

I sighed, "No."

"You're walking a thin line."

"Don't I know it?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, if Michelle has any say I don't have a decision in it."

"What?"

"She is trying to break it off. She doesn't want me risking everything for her."

"She loves you and doesn't want to see you hurt."

"I love her."

"I know man, you've always loved her."

"I wish I knew who that damn leak was. Michelle seems to have an idea...at least that it's a woman. She used female pronouns."

"I'm sure she'd tell you if she knew."

"You're right. I'm sure she would."

"In the meantime we still have damage control to do."

I nodded, "Ok. Let's get to it."

I tried to push Michelle from my mind as I got to work with Rich. I did not want to lose Michelle but I was taking a huge risk by not walking away. My heart told me she was worth it, but my brain told me I was crazy...then again Michelle always drove me a little crazy. I guess this was just par for the course. Either way I wouldn't lose her again... not after everything I went through to get her back. I wasn't going to let go.