

GRUMPY

Silver Fox Daddy

A J S U M M E R S

GRUMPY SILVER FOX
DADDY

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS BILLIONAIRE BOSS
ROMANCE



A J SUMMERS

ATTRACTION PUBLISHING

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NEWSLETTER



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CHAPTER 1



ANA

I TAKE ONE LAST WISTFUL GLANCE AT THE COZY COFFEE SHOP that has been my sanctuary for the past five years. Despite the pink “Caffeine Fix” sign flickering above the door, the once lively hub of downtown NYC is now empty, its customers enticed away by corporate giants.

Starbucks and Dunkin’ Donuts may have won the coffee war, but I refuse to let them crush my spirit.

Today, I must put my dreams of latte art and homemade pastries on hold. I have an interview at Sanders International, the epitome of everything that drove me out of business. Talk about diving headfirst into the enemy’s territory.

But desperate times call for desperate measures, and I could use a steady paycheck right now.

I tug on my suit jacket, straightening the collar, and walk the few blocks to the sleek high-rise that houses Sanders International. The building stands tall, its glass windows reflecting the vibrant chaos of the city. As I step inside, I’m hit with a wave of cold air, an ironic contrast to the steamy warmth of my former coffee shop.

The elevator whisks me upward, and my nervous energy amplifies with each passing floor. By the time the doors slide open on the 99th floor, my heart is pounding like I just ran a marathon.

I face a sleek reception desk, manned by a chic woman with her phone glued to her ear. She gestures for me to sit and continues her conversation in hushed tones.

I glance around the stylish, minimalist waiting area, where pristine white walls showcase modern art pieces. The sound of clacking heels draws my attention, and I watch as a door on the far side opens. Out steps a walking, talking God, his face a masterpiece of divine craftsmanship. A hint of arrogance radiates from his every pore.

I catch my breath, momentarily stunned by the magnetic force he exudes. Brando Sanders, the CEO of this energy infrastructure empire, walks toward me with purpose. His suit, tailored to perfection to accentuate his masculine form, clings to him like it's afraid to let go.

Our eyes meet, and a live wire shoots between us. Sparks, undeniable and electrifying, crackle in the air. I can't help but blush, mentally cursing my traitorous body for betraying my resentment with attraction.

Brando approaches, extending his hand with a confident smile. "Ana, I presume?" His deep and velvety voice evokes a symphony of sensations.

My heart fluttering, I shake off my stupor and stand, reaching out to take his hand. He's taller than I expected. I'm not used to men towering over me, especially when I wear heels, but Brando is the exception. "Yes, that's me. Ana Layne."

He releases my hand, leaving it cold and empty. But the memory of his touch lingers. "Pleasure to meet you, Ana. I've heard great things about your coffee shop."

I raise an eyebrow, surprised that he even knows about it. "Well, not great enough. Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts swooped in and sucked away my customers."

Brando chuckles, a low, rich sound that resonates in my chest. "Ah, the giants of the coffee world. They can be relentless, can't they?"

I glare at him, crossing my arms. "Relentless, heartless, and with pockets deeper than the Mariana Trench."

He grins, a playful glint in his eyes. "I can't deny that I have deep pockets too, but I'd like to think I also have a heart."

“Does it come with cream and sugar?” I retort, unable to resist the temptation.

He leans against the reception desk, his expression lighting up with amusement. “Well, Ana, that depends. Are you bitter like black coffee or sweet like a caramel macchiato?”

I smirk, playfully tapping a finger against my chin. “Oh, Mr. Sanders, I’m a delightful mix of bitter and sweet. Just like the perfect espresso shot.”

His eyes sparkle with amusement, his lips twitching in a half-smile. “I must say, that’s an intriguing combination. I like that you are not afraid to speak your mind.”

I step back, adopting a mock-serious tone. “I’m afraid my filter was lost in a tragic espresso machine accident.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “Please, call me Brando.”

As he gestures toward his impressive office, I follow him inside, my eyes widening at the breathtaking view of the city skyline. The towering skyscrapers seem like distant giants from this height, and the hustle and bustle of downtown is only a low hum.

He takes a seat behind a sleek, modern desk, motioning for me to sit across from him. I settle into the plush chair, feeling both intimidated and exhilarated by the surroundings.

Brando Sanders is a heartthrob. His well-toned body is rippling from his suit, his black hair is sprinkled with silver strands. Golden sunlight plays across his hair, casting a halo of radiance around him. Heat I was not expecting spreads from my core. A dark curl falls over his forehead, and I’m yearning to touch it.

What in the world is wrong with me?

I avert my gaze. There is no way I’m going to allow myself to think about him in this way, no matter how stirringly gorgeous he is. I hate what he and his kind stand for in corporate America.

“Now, Ana, tell me,” Brando begins, leaning back and studying me with an intensity that makes my body hum. “Why

do you believe you're the right candidate to work for me?"

Well, he just gets right down to business, doesn't he?

I take a moment to answer, reminding myself that I'm here to impress and secure a job, not to succumb to the magnetic pull of this sexy-as-sin man.

"Well," I begin, my voice steady, "aside from my impeccable coffee-making skills, I bring a unique perspective to the table. My experience as a small business owner has taught me the value of dedication and flexibility. I know what it takes to thrive in a competitive market, even if I didn't quite make it."

I pause for effect and add, "Yet."

He leans forward, his gaze unwavering.

"Fair enough. This could be a steppingstone for you, I'd understand. But is working for a large corporation the right place for you to gather your bearings and figure out your next steps? Will you be able to adjust and fit in?" His silky-smooth voice ripples over me like a satin sheet. My skin responds with goosebumps, and I rub my arms to chase them away.

But I meet his gaze head on, refusing to let his intimidating aura shake me. "While I may resent the wealth that big corporations represent, I also understand the need for balance. My entrepreneurial spirit and my ability to think outside the box will bring a fresh perspective to your organization. I promise you, I won't let my resentment cloud my professionalism. But I also won't lose my authenticity."

By the time I finish, I'm picking imaginary lint off my pantsuit, hesitant to look at him directly for fear of another uncalled for physical reaction.

I look down at my hands. My fingers are twisted in a painful knot. I relax them and nervously smooth my jacket.

Get it together, Ana. You need this job.

Brando's eyebrows lift slightly, and a genuine smile plays on his lips. "You're quite the firecracker."

I grin, relaxing into the conversation. "And you are quite the charmer. But let's not forget that charm alone won't get you a

great assistant. You need someone who can match your drive and challenge you when needed. Lucky for you, I happen to be just that person.”

He leans back, his eyes never leaving mine. “Confidence and a sharp tongue. I must say, you’re starting to grow on me quickly.”

I raise an eyebrow, my heart skipping a beat at his words. “Starting to? I’ll have you know, I’m as charming as a triple-shot espresso on a Monday morning.”

He laughs, a deep, melodic sound that fills the room. “I’m intrigued. I believe we might just make an unstoppable team.”

His gaze captures mine, the air thick with anticipation and unspoken promises. It’s impossible to ignore the tingling erupting all over my body.

I raise an eyebrow, a mix of surprise and delight washing over me. “Does this mean I’m hired?”

Brando nods, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Indeed, you are. Consider yourself part of the Sanders International team.”

I grin. “I am looking forward to helping you keep your empire running like a well-oiled coffee machine.”

He chuckles, a warm sound that resonates deep within me. “I have no doubt about that, Ana. Now, can you start tomorrow?”

I feign consideration, placing a finger against my chin and looking at my phone briefly. “Hmm, let me check my busy schedule. Oh, look, it’s completely free! Yes, I can definitely start tomorrow.”

Brando rises from his chair, extending his hand once again. “Perfect. I’ll see you bright and early, then.”

I take his hand, a jolt of electricity shooting through me. “Bright and early it is. But don’t think I won’t hold you accountable for my daily dose of caffeine.”

He raises an eyebrow, a playful smirk tugging at his lips. “Oh, Ana, you underestimate my ability to source the finest coffee beans for my most valuable assistant.”

I laugh, unable to contain my excitement. “Well, as long as you keep my coffee supply flowing, I might just forgive you for being wealthy beyond belief.”

Brando leans in closer, his voice dropping to a low, teasing whisper. “Who said anything about forgiveness? I think you’ll find that being on the inside has its perks.”

He’s looking at me as if he wants to set me ablaze, and I actually wonder if my underwear is going to spontaneously catch fire.

I shudder and meet his stare with a mix of challenge and curiosity. “Oh, really? I’m not so easily swayed by perks. I have high standards.”

He smirks, and the intensity is replaced by a glint of mischief dancing in his eyes. “Good. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

After closing the door to his office, I practically run to the elevator, my mind set on getting out of the building quickly.

Can someone please hand me a fresh pair of underwear?

A female voice behind me stops my hasty exit.

“Ana.” Her voice is authoritative, and I turn to the woman from earlier standing at the reception desk, calling me to come back.

I slowly walk over, and she hands me a binder.

“These are the onboarding documents like access badges, non-disclosures, and some other legal documents for you to sign. We do a lot of proprietary work here that you will be exposed to before it gets to Brando.” She pauses. “I’m Charlotte, by the way.”

The thickness of this binder looks daunting. It will take me all week to sift through it. I’m cringing on the inside.

She hands me another binder, this one smaller. “These are instructions on how to access the training materials online. You don’t have set hours, but you should be here before he arrives in the morning and stay until he leaves.”

Good grief.

“Thanks. I’ll get on this right away. Can I have your card in case I have any questions?” Charlotte offers me her card, and I take it from her well-manicured hands.

I turn to go and notice a desk in the corner of the room. I stare at it, trying to see myself behind it.

This was not how my life was meant to unfold. I was never supposed to work for a big corporation. It goes against everything I believe. I was my own boss, running my own business my way. Now I will have to tailor everything I do to what someone else wants.

I don’t know if I can do this.

Charlotte breaks through my thoughts. “Are you okay? Can I get you something?”

“No, thank you. I’m just making plans, racing ahead as usual.” I smile at her and turn away. I walk to the elevator and press the down button.

As the doors close behind me, I think, *this is my life now. Meetings, elevator rides to the 99th floor every single day, lunch at my desk, running at breakneck speed with no time to do the things I want to do.*

And working for a piping hot billionaire.

I step out of the elevator into the bustling lobby of the high-rise I will now be working in. The marble floors, check-in desk, extravagant seating areas with white leather couches and bright lighting are evidence that my life has changed in the blink of an eye. One day I’m running a successful coffee house with live bands on the weekends and quiet corners for work during the week. Tomorrow, I begin working in the oppressive corporate world.

I went from making my dreams come true to working for someone else’s dream.

But the promise of a new beginning and the magnetic pull I felt still vibrate through me, even in my toes. I walk out of Sanders International, my heart brimming with both dread and a newfound hope.

Tomorrow, I'll step into a world that feels both unfamiliar and enticing.

I hail a cab uptown. During the drive, my thoughts linger on my new job and my striking new boss. The heat returns, and I allow myself to daydream. His dark, well-tailored suit superbly set off his eyes and tan. His chin was wickedly sharp. His lips were full.

I bet they are firm.

I watched his hands as we were talking. Strong, slender fingers. Corded, thick forearms. I open my eyes, catching myself tightly squeezing my crossed legs. If I was alone, I would have finished my daydream, but catching the eye of the driver, I blush.

I'll have to fall back on my business degree now and work on someone else's terms.

But I can enjoy the other perks of the job, if only in my head.

CHAPTER 2



BRANDO

GAZING AT THE CLOSED DOOR BEHIND ANA, I SHAKE MY HEAD, as if that will chase the alluring vision of her firm round ass from my head.

She gave a smooth interview. As nervous as she was, I doubt that she noticed how I drooled over her. It was difficult to focus when her blue eyes bore into mine while she bantered with me and answered my questions.

Ana might be good for my company. Her experience and even the loss of her business could provide a unique perspective. I liked the spark and the intelligence behind her eyes. She'll make my days run smoother for sure. Maybe I can finally take some time off and spend it with Addison.

A pang of guilt hits me. I'm all she has in the world, and I am at the firm all the time. As I pinch the bridge of my nose to stave off a headache, I think of the huge mountain of paperwork in front of me that I need to get through today. I feverishly flip through the pages of a legal document.

Why can't they write these things in English?

Charlotte buzzes the intercom. "Brando, you have a meeting in five minutes."

"Thanks, Charlotte," I reply and release the button. The small drawer to my right holds my lifesaving antacids, and I pop two in my mouth.

This job is a killjoy. There is always an emergency. A meeting, a call, emails up the wazoo, and projects I want to work on yet

have no time to even start.

I rub my neck, commanding the tightness to release. But the headache is stubborn. A memory of Ana's body flashes through my mind. Smart, intelligent, and gorgeous. I could certainly think of other ways to relieve my tension.

Good grief, man, get a grip. You're hiring her as an assistant, not office eye candy.

I also grab two Tylenol and head out the door to my meeting. Work life balance has not been a thing around here lately.

As I walk down the hall, my mind is still on Ana. Her blonde hair was coiled on top of her head with wispy tendrils framing her clean, make-up-free face. Her blue eyes were sharp and cutting. A memory of her fair, soft skin just above the swell of her breasts in that pantsuit makes me catch my breath.

I snap out of my daydream.

Maybe it was not such a great idea to hire her.

Doubt creeps in. I don't need distractions. I have enough of those already. My priorities are clear. Now that my father has retired, I am the head of the company. But both he and the board watch me like a hawk, adding to my daily headache.

The meeting started a few minutes ago. The board called it to get a status update on all departments. After, they will call my father and report. He always knows what's going on before I get a chance to tell him.

I sit through the meeting, barely listening, and think about Ana. I can't go back on my decision to hire her just because she's beautiful. I need someone to relieve me of time consuming, repetitive, daily tasks, and she appears to be a good choice.

And it's not like I haven't seen beautiful women before. This should be no different.

Though there is something under her beauty that mesmerizes me, and I can't put my finger on it.

I hear my name and look up from my daydream.

“Yes, ah, can you repeat the question?”

The board president sighs loudly at this inconvenience.

“What are your plans for expanding the office space?”

I clear my throat and speak decisively. I need the board to allow me leeway so I can take the firm in the direction I want to go.

“I have a solution. It’s a building a few blocks from here that came up for sale a week ago. I will look at it this week. It has the square footage we need. We could move a couple of business projects over, as well as the foundation I’m looking to start.”

“We need to see the proposal as soon as possible.”

“Of course.”

“If there are no other questions or comments, this meeting is adjourned.” The board president is already standing up as he speaks. He glances in my direction and gives me a cold look.

Who peed in his coffee today?

I stand up and firmly meet his gaze while buttoning my suit jacket. I will not allow this man or any other board member to spoil my plans.

I grab my notebook. As I walk through the room, I shake hands and exchange pleasantries with the more personable board members and walk back down the hall to my office.

I stare at the document for the building I mentioned in the meeting, going back over the details. It looks great on paper. It’s only a couple of blocks from my current office. I make a decision and press the intercom button.

“Charlotte, set up a meeting for me to see that building in the afternoon. I’ve sent the details to your email.”

“Will do. You have a call on line one.”

The call is about a business process re-engineering project I’m working on. It’s one of the things I want to change about this company. Sanders International has been using antiquated

tools and procedures for far too long. We need a complete overhaul to bring it up to speed with the 21st century.

I end the call on a high note and walk out of my office.

“Charlotte, I’m heading out to lunch with my daughter. What time did you set the meeting for?”

“It’s at four o’clock this afternoon.”

“Then I’ll go meet my attorney right after lunch.”

I take the elevator down and walk through the crowded lobby and out the revolving doors, greeting the sunny day. I take a deep breath of fresh air and slide into the back of the waiting car.

“We’re going to Town School, Seventy-Sixth and York. I want to take Addison to lunch.”

“Yes, sir.” The driver closes my door and slides into the driver’s seat. We pull away slowly and ease into the traffic.

I immediately pick up the phone and call the school director to inform her that I’m picking up my daughter for lunch. For the rest of the drive, I answer emails, and before I know it, we are in front of Town School. The bell has just rung, and uniformed kids are pouring out of the building like ants. I spot Addison talking with a friend and give her a few minutes while I finish up with my last email.

The door opens, and Addison rushes into the car, slamming the door and flinging herself into my arms at the same time.

I laugh and hug her tightly. She is a flurry of energy and the brightest spot in my life. Sometimes, my heart aches when I look at her. Every day, she looks more and more like her mother, and I break a little inside each time I see her.

Addison has an uncanny ability to shatter my heart and mend it at the same time.

“Where do you want to go to lunch today, Addison?”

“Umm, let’s have pizza,” she says enthusiastically, like we didn’t just have pizza a few days ago.

“Sounds good.” I catch the driver’s eye in the mirror, and he nods, knowing where to take us.

“How was school so far?”

Addison starts chattering about math, her friend from English, and this boy from science, and by the time we arrive, I’m out of breath without having said a word. She gets her excitement for life from both me and her mother, though mine has waned over the years. I must admit, it’s been a lonely life since her mom passed.

We go up to the counter and order our usual, pizza and Cesar salad. Addison has quieted down, and I glance at her to make sure she’s alright. We get our drinks and find our favorite booth. In this rare moment of silence, I look my daughter over and feel grateful. If it hadn’t been for her, I would have given up. She has kept me alive and sane these last twelve years.

As if reading my mind, she takes a deep breath in.

“Dad, tell me about Mom.”

I stiffen, and my jaw tightens, fighting back the lump forming in my throat. Any mention of her mom, and I start to shut down. She died of postpartum hemorrhage just hours after giving birth to Addison, intertwining my greatest joy and my deepest loss. There was nothing the doctors didn’t try to stop the bleeding. She was one in a hundred thousand, and it didn’t matter how wealthy and powerful I was. It happened all the same.

I take a napkin, wipe my mouth to buy some time, and answer cautiously, “She was wonderful.” That’s all I’m able to say without breaking down. Losing her was unfair and cruel, and I had sworn off God for some time after her death, only slowly finding my way back to some version of spirituality over the past few years.

Sometimes, Addison lets it go at that, but today she persists.

“Why don’t you ever talk about her?” she asks, traces of anger in her young voice.

“Because I miss her terribly. But I will, pumpkin. Just not today and not here. Let’s talk about something else. Please.”

Addison pouts, putting her fork down and crossing her arms. I let the quiet stretch and notice Addison eventually relax.

“Will you ever get married again?” Addison pushes.

“No. Now drop the subject.”

I’m short with Addison, and she tears up, her pink cheeks turning a bright red. She puts her head down and picks at her salad. I can’t stand to see her sad.

“It’s been just you and me for awhile now, pumpkin. I don’t see any reason to change that,” I say gently.

Her eyes meet mine and she doesn’t smile, but I see her tears have stopped. I try a distraction.

“What else happened today?” I probe, pushing my sadness away and replacing it with a cheery voice.

That’s all it takes. Addison perks up and starts talking animatedly about an upcoming birthday party she wants to attend. All her friends will be there. She tells me about the karaoke theme and asks if she can buy a new outfit.

“I think we can make that happen.” I smile.

Then she asks about my day.

“It has been full, as usual. Fully optimized,” I correct myself and smile. “I hired an assistant which will give me more time with you.”

I poke her button nose, and she giggles.

“When do I get my birthday present? You promised me a movie and dinner, remember?”

“I do. How about tonight?”

She squeals with delight and starts talking about the movie *Avatar*. All her friends went to see it in 3D, and she can’t wait to experience for herself what the hype is all about.

I breathe out, relieved.

A possible breakdown is averted, though I know I’m not off the hook. There will be more questions about her mom, and I’ll have to give her something. She is growing up without a

female role model in her life. There will be things I will struggle to answer or help her with, especially as she begins navigating puberty.

Maybe I should settle down at some point and give Addison a stepmom.

I will that thought away. If I could chase it out of the state or country, I would. I won't go through that again, and I won't put Addison through it, either.

The women in my life are not stepmom material. They are a distraction, and that is how I like it.

I'm safe and in control.

Impervious.

We walk to the car, and Tony opens the door for us. He eases back into traffic and heads back to Town.

Before Addison can jump out at the curb, I give her a big squeeze.

"See you tonight."

"I can't wait," Addison squeaks and runs to join her friends. I see her talking animatedly, and then I hear shrieks of excitement. She must have shared what movie we will be going to see tonight. I shake my head, smiling. She is almost a teenager. The very idea makes my heart skip a beat, and I rub my chest.

Let's take it one day at a time, shall we?

"I'm headed to a meeting at this address."

My attorney's office is all the way back downtown. I've spent countless nights wrestling with the dilemma of how to move forward with my firm. Today, I am taking the first step, seeking someone that will show me what options I have.

The driver takes the slip of paper I give him and punches the address into the GPS. We pull away from the curb, and I take another look in Addison's direction before we drive out of sight, the ringing of my phone breaking me out of my reverie.

“This is Brando,” I answer curtly. A sexy voice on the other end of the line makes me think of Ana.

“What are you wearing right now?” Veronica, my occasional lover’s voice is low and seductive.

I smile at the playful question. “I’m wearing a suit and tie.”

“Well, how about we remedy that tonight? My place, say seven?” Veronica’s velvet voice is pouty and full of promise.

“I can’t. Can we move this to tomorrow night?” It has been a while since we saw each other last, but I like to keep our relationship casual, despite Veronica’s occasional attempts to make us more permanent.

She sighs. “Fine, tomorrow, but don’t forget.” She clicks off, and I hold the phone out, looking at it and grinning.

CHAPTER 3



ANA

I'M FLUSTERED BY THE TIME I GET TO MY FAVORITE restaurant downtown. Despite getting the job earlier in the morning, I feel apprehensive, having counted on a few more days before I started the new job.

But it looks like today is my last day of freedom. So, lunch at Balthazar is just what the doctor ordered.

Race is already at a table for two. He raises his hand as he sees me, his eyes questioning. We got our usual people-watching spot with the best view of Spring Street.

As I flop down, I clumsily bump the table. Ice clinks and water sloshes onto the tablecloth. I apologize and turn to hang my purse on the back of the chair while Race dabs at the spill.

“That bad?”

He is my best friend and roommate. During our senior year of high school, we decided we would live together when we both got into Columbia, me on a full scholarship, him on a Mom-and-Dad sponsorship. He comes from money but doesn't like being alone, and neither do I. Since we are both single in New York, it made sense to share a place. And it's a lot more fun.

He knows me inside and out. When I was going through a tough time after my parents died, he was there for me. When Race decided to come out to his parents as gay, I stood by his side. We are practically family.

I look at him, my eyes welling up with tears.

“It was hard to walk away from my building this morning. Looking around at all that I have lost just about killed me. Then I see the big chain coffee houses that stole my business with customers that used to frequent my place waiting in line for their more expensive, fancy coffees. I had to walk past them on my way to the interview. It was disheartening.”

Race is silent. He knows I need to vent and is gracious enough to let me spew out all my frustration.

The waiter comes, and we both order salads.

“How did the interview go?”

“I got the job,” I exclaim. “At least something went my way today. But you should have seen this guy, Race. Smug, rich, entitled, the embodiment of all that I hate about corporate businessmen. And at the same time, he was charming and fun, and I enjoyed his company. I’m so confused.” I laugh, aware of the contradiction.

I notice I’m tying my napkin into a knot. Race reaches across the table and puts his hands over mine.

“Breathe, Ana.” He looks me in the eye, so that I know he’s serious, and I start to calm down. I take a deep breath, then another one, and my body gradually relaxes. I sit back against the chair and stare at the table.

“That’s better,” Race says and sips his water. “So, tell me how you really feel.” There is a moment of silence before we both erupt in laughter. It feels good to laugh after the confusing day I have had so far.

I lean forward and look at Race conspiratorially. He does the same.

I whisper, “He might be the enemy, but he is super hot.” I wink. “He made me tingle all over.” That lightens the mood, and Race chuckles.

“So, tell me all the juicy details, girl.” I relax and tell him about Brando looking like a titan, the curl over his forehead, his sinful eyes, and the rippled biceps teeming from his expensive suit.

Race can't help himself and covers his mouth, shimmying in his seat. "He sounds just awful." Sarcasm drips from his lips, teasing a smile out of me. Race knows how to calm me down and find the positive in any situation.

My phone breaks our joke, and as I pick it up, I realize I don't recognize the number.

"Hello, this is Ana."

"Hi," a woman's voice responds on the other end, "I'm calling about the building you have for sale. We would like to set up a meeting with the buyer for later today, around four o'clock. Does this work for you?"

My face gets hot with emotion.

So soon?

"Um, sure, that sounds great. Do you need the address?"

"No, we have it, thank you."

My heart sinks.

"A buyer is meeting me this afternoon." I turn back to Race. "Must be some big shot with lots of money to throw around. It makes me sick to my stomach."

Race nods in understanding.

I'm whiny, but I think I'm allowed. It's not easy to let go of the building that has been a part of me since I was born. I grew up there, working in my parents' diner, hearing stories of my grandparents, and dreaming of the day I would make it my own. I put five years of sweat and some tears into it, loving it and the people it brought into my life.

If I could only sell it to someone like me, a small business owner and dreamer, rather than to some corporate jackass who will probably turn it into a condo for the super-rich. If I didn't need to sell so badly, I wouldn't even take the meeting without knowing more details about the prospective buyer.

Race looks at me with sympathy. "I can't imagine what you're going through, but you're strong. Don't let Money Pockets

bully you into selling if you don't want to sell to them. You do have a say."

"I know. But if it's a good offer, I don't think I have the luxury of turning it down, no matter what. I'm in survival mode. The banks are breathing down my neck."

My financial situation became critical once I started losing business to the big chain coffee shops. It took about two years for the final straw to break the camel's back. There is a Starbucks or Dunkin's on every other block, a convenience my small coffee house couldn't compete with.

Thinking about the future of my beloved building turns my stomach upside down. I barely closed the doors to it a few short hours ago, and I already have an offer. I thought there would be more time to come to terms with my loss. How will I find the strength to let go of so much history this quickly?

Race's voice breaks into my thoughts.

"How about after lunch, I take you shopping for new clothes? On me? You need a professional wardrobe now that you're working for a big-shot corporation, and I have all the connections. It's as good of an excuse as you will ever have." He smirks at me and winks.

I glare at him. "Please don't remind me." I sigh. But I start work tomorrow, and I should take him up on his more than generous offer.

It's great to have a friend like Race. He comes from money and is generous to a fault. Although he doesn't have to, he works. Outfitting celebrities on the daily and sharing all the juicy gossip he overhears with me is his jam.

"Okay, let's do it," I say, and he laughs. He waves his hand, air signing to get the waiter's attention.

Spending money with him will be fun.

After we pay the check, we walk a few blocks to Court Street where the best shopping starts. Race is a style consultant and has connections in most high-end clothing stores.

We walk to Rag and Bone, and I stare around me in fascination and excitement. I may not like the corporate world, but I do love wearing expensive clothes.

Talk about contradictions.

But then again, what's wrong with looking good while you're saving the world?

While we're at it, there's also nothing wrong with swooning over a hot billionaire, even if he is the CEO of an energy infrastructure company and your future boss.

It's bullshit rules, and I don't buy them.

One of the store clerks comes over and asks us if we need any help. We politely decline and begin rifling through the racks. Race knows my size, as any good style consultant worth his weight would, and by the time we make it back to a dressing room, he has eight outfits for me to try on. I rub my hands together in excitement.

Race hangs the clothes up for me. "I'll be right out here if you need a different size or color." He walks away, and I hear him dismiss another store attendant, saying, "I've got her."

I close the door to try on the exquisite pieces. Just holding these clothes against my skin makes me feel special. I put on a skirt and a matching jacket that mold to my figure as if they were made especially for me.

I walk out and model it in front of the larger mirror. "Race, what do you think of this one?" He comes over, a finger on his lips, and circles me.

"I like it. Try the others on so I can compare." I walk back into my dressing room and change into a pair of pants and a top. It's flattering, and out of nowhere, I wonder what Brando will think of me wearing it.

Between outfits, another thought about Brando sneaks in. My skin tingles. That man might represent all that I dislike about the corporate world, but my physical reaction to him is undeniable. I wrap my arms around my waist as a memory of his strong shoulders flash across my vision. As I begin to pull my arms apart, I flatten my hands on my belly and close my

eyes. I see Brando, his hands on my waist, fingers kneading my skin and inching their way toward my chest. I slide my hands over his shoulders while his fingers brush against the cotton-covered swell of my breast, snaking their way up to my neck. I can smell his cologne from earlier, and I inhale deeply. He leans in, his lips millimeters from my parted ones. The heat spreads. My panties are soaked just as he dips his head...

Knock, knock...

I jump, lose my balance, and fall on the cushy chair in the dressing room. Race's voice is concerned on the other side of the door.

"Are you okay? You've been in there a while now. How do the clothes fit? Can I get you something different?"

I'm breathing hard and a bit disoriented, but manage to get out a shaky, "No, I'm... I'm fine, thank you."

I laugh quietly to myself.

Wow. In public, Ana? Really?

I let out a huge breath and smooth my hair back as I get dressed, hurriedly choosing a pair of pants, the blue and gray skirt and jacket that Race liked, and a pink and gray dress with a matching jacket. I yank the door open, still wobbly, and hand Race the outfits as I rush past him to get some air.

I pace back and forth on the sidewalk, muttering and trying to recover as Race pays for the items. Finally, he joins me outside and hands me the bag, looking at me curiously.

"Thank you, Race. You have no idea how much I appreciate you doing this for me." I look down shyly, embarrassed at having had a fantasy in a public dressing room.

He nods at me, smirking. I wish he didn't know me so well.

Race hooks my arm into his and pulls me down the street. "So, do you want to tell me what that flush is all about?" He laughs as I look away, heat rising to my face.

"No, I do not." I grin and punch his arm playfully. I'm glad he's with me today. I feel light and carefree as we stroll down the sidewalk, chit-chatting and gossiping about his coworkers.

We visit a few more stores, allowing me to get a full wardrobe for work. I also grab some perfume, after asking Race's opinion on the scent.

Walking arm and arm, Race looks at me with concern as the meeting draws closer. "How about I go to the meeting with you? For moral support."

I think about this for a minute. "Thank you for the offer, but I should do this on my own, like a big girl."

Laden with bags, Race walks me down to my coffee house.

As we near, memories flash of my parents and grandparents, and a sob breaks free. I need to be strong now. I can't go into a negotiation looking blotchy.

We get to the door, and I stand there, looking up at the building and swaying on my feet. Race puts his arm around me and gives me a big, comforting hug. I let him hold me, borrowing some of his strength for my own.

Finally, he pulls back and takes the bottle of perfume out of the bag and spritzes my neck.

"Happiness in a bottle," he says as I laugh at his corniness and hand him the packages to take back to our place.

"You're sure you don't need me in there?" His eyebrows are raised.

"No, I'll be fine, but thank you for today. It was a great help to get my mind off my impending hell."

"No problem. I'm here for you always." As he leans in to give me another hug, a black car pulls up to the curb, and I pull away.

"I guess I better get inside. I'll see you tonight at the bar."

"Wouldn't miss it." Race turns and walks down the sidewalk as I enter my coffee house for the very last time.

CHAPTER 4



BRANDO

AFTER A PRODUCTIVE AND ENLIGHTENING MEETING WITH MY attorney, I'm energized and brimming with ideas. Over the next few days, he will review the mountain of paperwork I sent him, so that we can brainstorm the best strategy to remove the board of directors.

Expanding our office space is crucial to my plan to revamp the firm and align it with my vision for its future. Arriving at the building's address later that afternoon, I double-check the details of the property, including its zoning and price. Glancing up from the documents, I notice a young couple embracing in front of the building. The woman looks familiar, and when the man steps back, I realize it's my new assistant, Ana. A strange sensation takes hold of me, twisting my gut. Is it jealousy?

I observe as she hands the man some shopping bags. Who could he be? Her boyfriend? Husband? I didn't see a ring on her hand during the interview. I watch her stride into the building, the sway of her hips igniting a stir below my waist.

I step out of the car, the driver closing the door behind me. Taking a quick glance around the building, I inspect its foundation and exterior walls, which appear to be in good shape. With a sense of curiosity, I open the door and enter the building, wondering where Ana went. The aroma of brewing coffee fills the air as I scan the room. It exudes a bohemian ambiance, with its tan and teal color scheme. Plants are strategically placed in the corners, while tables and chairs in

natural colors fill the space. The room reflects a free-spirited and friendly atmosphere.

Ana is standing with her back to me as I approach the bar. Clearing my throat, I signal my presence. She turns around, and our eyes meet, instantly captivating me with her beauty and a strange sense of familiarity. She observes me with a perplexed expression.

“I hope I’m in the right place. I’m looking for the owner of this building,” I say, attempting to break the silence.

“I’m the owner,” she responds glaring at me, and I remember what she mentioned during the interview. She spoke of this business, the one she was forced to shut down. What are the odds? A wave of understanding washes over me as I grasp the significance of what I’m about to do. I don’t consider myself heartless, but sometimes I must make tough decisions when it comes to business.

“Ana, what are the odds? I suppose I don’t need to introduce myself,” I say, flashing a wide grin, hoping to thaw the frosty temper radiating from her.

“No, you don’t,” she replies stiffly, her eyes whipping me with icy fire.

She pushes a cup of coffee toward me and suggests, “Why don’t you sit and enjoy some coffee? I need to use up the last of it anyway.” I gaze at her momentarily, then shift my attention to the cup. Tentatively, I bring it closer to my lips, enticed by its delightful aroma. However, her intense gaze prevents me from taking a sip.

Our eyes lock in a defiant stare, neither yielding, nor showing any sign of flinching. Finally, she takes a sip from her coffee and closes her eyes momentarily. Is that a tear I see? Oh God, is she planning to use her tears as a negotiation tactic?

Nice try.

I’m a seasoned businessman, and tears won’t work on me.

But I really don’t want to make this woman cry.

Well, I do want to make her cry, I correct myself. But not like that. I wouldn't mind hearing her cry out my name while she comes around my cock.

Man, get a grip and focus.

"Did I do something wrong? You seem upset." I attempt to shake off all thoughts of sex and regain my composure. The pressure from the board to expand our space has been incessant, and I also need the building to house the new projects I'm envisioning. I'm eager to settle this today.

"This building has been in my family for generations." Her tone simultaneously carries a hint of sorrow and accusation.

"For three generations, to be precise. My grandparents, my parents, and myself," she says, her voice trembling. "And now, it's gone, driven out of business by soulless corporations that have crept into my neighborhood, infringing on my market share and the relationships I have built for years."

Uncertain of what to say, I simply observe and listen, captivated by her words. Her eyes are piercing through me as if searching for something deeper.

I want to wrap her in my arms and comfort her.

"Look, Ana, I understand you're going through a difficult situation. My goal is to negotiate a sale. The circumstances surrounding your building are unfortunate, but I'm here to offer you a fair deal," I assert, hoping to steer the conversation and my mind back to business.

Ana takes her time to respond, and I wait patiently. Finally, she sets her mug down and asserts with authority, "You're on my turf now. This building is still in my name, and I'll only sell it if my terms are met. I won't settle for anything less than an agreement that respects the essence of what this place once was."

A surge of admiration washes over me. "Challenge accepted, Ana. Let's discuss the terms, the price, and the conditions that will satisfy both of our visions."

"You're not the type of person I had in mind to sell to. I'd prefer the buyer was another small business owner. Not

someone like you.”

Someone like me?

“That is direct.”

“What are your intentions for this building?” she questions, her tone dripping with skepticism.

I would consider firing her on the spot if she weren’t so intriguing and I didn’t desperately need someone to start shouldering some of my mundane day-to-day tasks.

But first, I need to secure the purchase of the building.

“I plan to renovate it into an office building,” I reply. She slowly nods in agreement.

“That’s a good start. At least it won’t be a new condo development for the ultra-wealthy.” She takes a deep breath and declares, “I want a say in what goes into this building.”

I am taken aback by her boldness, unable to suppress a chuckle.

“No, I don’t think so. Once I buy this building, it’s mine. Why would I give you any say in what I do with my property?” I respond, amused by her earnestness.

“That is term number one,” Ana asserts, folding her arms over her beautiful chest, a move that does not escape me. She closes her eyes, as if steeling herself against my presence.

This situation could unfold in several ways. One of which would be me walking out. But that would mean I’d need to start my search for both an assistant and an office space from scratch again.

I don’t have the time or energy for starting over, especially if it is just for the sake of making a point.

And I enjoy her way too much.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and consider her request. After purchasing this building, I plan to use it according to my needs, and I am not inclined to involve the previous owner.

But she doesn't know that. What I know is that she needs to sell.

"How about I walk out right now?" I say, probing her.

"Fine, go ahead," she responds stubbornly, testing my patience. I groan inwardly, realizing that she would probably make a decent poker player.

My problem is that this is the only building for sale within two blocks of the main hub—the perfect location. She must have realized that and is using it as leverage.

"Hm," I pause. "Here is an alternative that will make us both happy. I'm willing to offer you a hundred thousand above asking," I grind out, my blood pressure rising a little. But I meant it when I said I wanted this settled today, and a hundred thousand is a drop in the bucket.

But she continues to stare at me blankly, not moving a muscle.

Remind me never to play poker with this one.

"Fine. What is it that you want to go into this building?"

"It should in some way serve the community," she insists, her glare unwavering.

I take a good look around. She has taken great care of the space, and renovations will be minimal.

"That should not be a problem. As it so happens, I plan to start a nonprofit within the next few years and house its offices here."

She nods and says, "Okay, deal." We shake hands, and I hear a sigh of relief escape her. She drives a hard bargain; I'll give her that.

"I'll call my lawyers to set up a time for signing the papers and handing over the keys. I'll let you know the details," I inform her, packing up my briefcase while she tidies up the coffee bar. I watch her with a mixture of desperate desire and thinly veiled awe.

As she walks around the coffee bar and toward the door, I follow her, stealing a whiff of her intoxicating scent.

“I would say it was a pleasure doing business with you, but that would be a lie,” I remark in jest, meeting her smirk as she opens the door and steps onto the sidewalk. She locks up the building and turns to leave without uttering another word. She only nods at me and walks down the block, displaying grace in her stride.

Maybe she has taken dance lessons at some point?

I watch her round ass and the sway of her hips as she walks. I imagine holding her waist, and my body ignites.

I snap myself out of the fantasy, trying to prevent the boner that’s stirring in my pants.

My driver opens the car door, and I take one last look down the block before sliding into the back seat. Excitement floods me, electric anticipation humming within me.

I can’t wait to see how she does tomorrow.

I call Charlotte to let her know I’m heading home and ask if there are any calls I need to return. She informs me that my father is waiting for my call, and I decide to take care of it immediately, rather than having it spoil the evening ahead.

“Sanders,” he answers when the line connects.

“Hey, Dad. How are you?” I try not to anticipate the worst, but he never fails to disappoint.

“Did you buy that building?” he asks brusquely.

I close my eyes, attempting to remain calm.

“I did. I paid a bit over the asking price, but it will be worth it.”

“Why didn’t you consult me before making that decision?” He sounds irritated and gruff.

I sigh. “Because I’m running the company now. It’s a solid investment that aligns with my vision for the future.” My voice rises involuntarily, and my throat constricts in anger. “You were the one who asked me to take over the business in the first place, now let me run it my way,” I retort.

“Like I had anyone else to leave it to.”

His words sting, and my head buzzes.

I wish I had a sibling to share this burden with.

“I’m trying to ensure the company I built doesn’t fail,” he continues.

The driver pulls up to the curb in front of my building, exiting the vehicle to grant me privacy for the remainder of the conversation.

“Look, Dad, I have to go. I’m taking Addison out for her birthday.” I listen to him complain further about my impulsive decisions while I observe the physical reactions his rant causes in my body. Constricted throat, humming in my gut, a twitch in my leg. It’s a sure trick to gain distance from a situation and maintain composure. Eventually, my body’s sensations subside, and my father runs out of steam. He bids me goodbye.

I hang up and sit there for a few minutes. I truly wish he had given me a sibling, someone else to shoulder this burden with. I only agreed to lead the company out of guilt as his sole heir. While I strive to make him proud, our visions are not aligned. Even worse, the board is made up of people still living and breathing the twentieth century. They are more of a nuisance than a help.

I wish they could see the positive impact my changes will make.

I also wish I didn’t have to do what I’m about to do to them.

Irritated, I swipe the thoughts of work from my mind.

This is Addison’s time.

CHAPTER 5



ANA

AS I WALK AWAY, I FEEL HIS GAZE FIXED ON ME, CAUSING THE hair on the back of my neck to stand up and my legs to wobble. I reach the end of the block and slip inside a quaint bookstore.

I call my attorney, who confirms that the paperwork he already received from the Sanders party is in order. They seem to be in a rush. Perhaps I could have negotiated an even better price. But a hundred thousand above asking is not shabby. It will allow me to pay off all the loans and give me a head start for my next business endeavor.

“The meeting with Sanders’ lawyers is scheduled for ten tomorrow morning,” I tell him.

He assures me he’ll review whatever they send over later tonight or in the morning.

After we conclude the call, I continue browsing the store for a while longer before it’s time to meet up with Race.

My irritation lingers though. Not only because I had to sell my building and Sanders had the means to buy it, but also because I couldn’t help blushing under his ravenous, hypnotizing gaze.

Oh, if only I could have kicked him in the kneecaps!

I try to ignore the molten hot need between my legs to no avail.

But I suppose I should be grateful. I got more than I expected, and the money will come in handy for whatever I decide to do next. All things considered, it couldn’t have gone better.

I hop into a cab and text Race that I'm on my way, then I lean back and relax. It's been an intense day, and I'm ready to unwind. The car pulls up to Harry's bar, and I step out. The sun has set, but the evening air remains warm. Taking a moment to inhale deeply and compose myself, I head inside. Race is at the bar, and he gestures to a table in the back. I remove my jacket while he fetches our drinks.

Leaning in, he exclaims joyfully, "I might have a date later this week." He casually shifts his gaze toward his love interest, a dark and lanky man sitting at the bar who waves and smiles at us. I nod my approval and take a long sip of my dirty martini, realizing how much I needed this drink.

"How did it go today?" Race asks, setting his Long Island down.

"You will never guess who the buyer is," I tell him, still not grasping it myself.

His eyes widen, and he shakes his head, anticipating the answer before I say it.

"Yep, my new boss Brando Sanders." I take another sip of my martini. I should slow down. But it tastes good, and I deserve to let loose a bit.

"I can't believe it," he says, almost choking on his drink. "Tell me everything." Despite Race's concern for me, he can't help himself with juicy gossip.

Race widens his eyes as I give him the rundown of the afternoon. "I can't believe you sold your building to him. How do you feel about it?" His eyes show concern.

"At first, I hated myself; now, I'm just numb," I reply. Race gives me a small smile of understanding. He shakes his head in dismay. "We need to get you hooked up tonight."

At his comment, I notice that the music has changed and the lights have dimmed. The bar is full. I look around to see if I know anyone and accidentally catch the eye of a guy in a suit. He looks wealthy, well-dressed, and built, exactly like the man I dealt with today. But I'm angry at myself for my weak knees

around Brando, and this guy is a pale reminder of him. I would rather stab myself in the eye than talk to him.

I grab Race's attention and nod in the direction of the man eyeing me.

He wrinkles his nose. "Definitely a corporate type. You're not interested, are you? Just checking, since now you work for a big-wig corporate bully." He snorts at his joke.

I shake my head vigorously. "Hell no. Bite your tongue." I laugh and punch him in the arm. We order another round of drinks and some food.

"How was the rest of your day?"

He swallows and blushes. "Fantastic. I went to yoga and met a guy. We grabbed smoothies after class."

Race is all about living life to its fullest and not missing opportunities when they show up. "What's he like?"

Race coughs. "Cool so far." He talks loudly over the din of music and laughter. "I might ask him out."

We high-five and sip our drinks. I look around the bar, wondering if I might spot Brando. This swanky bar seems like his type of place.

"How do you feel about starting your job tomorrow?" Race inquires.

"Horrible. But it will pay well." We clink our glasses, laughing and talking animatedly about what we wish we could do to bring big business to its knees.

"We could stage a sit-in and chain ourselves to the doors, so their business halts and they lose money."

"Gasp."

"We could introduce a virus into their servers and cause a worldwide shutdown of their company."

I'm inspired and shoot out another one.

"What if we took apart all their equipment into individual pieces so they would have to put it together before starting a

shift at a construction site?”

Race grins and taps the table. “I have to use the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

I continue daydreaming about taking down corporate business, but soon a shadow falls over our table. The handsome guy in a swanky suit stands next to my chair, wearing a confident smile. He looks good, and his posture suggests he thinks he’s *the man*.

He’s holding two dirty martinis.

“I couldn’t help but notice you, and I had to come over and say hello.”

This guy has some nerve to approach a woman who is here with another man.

“I don’t want to be rude, but I’m not interested.” I look away and wait for him to leave.

He doesn’t.

“Come on, it won’t kill you to have one drink with me, will it?” He puts the drink on the table and watches me.

“No, it won’t kill me, but I’m not in the habit of doing things I don’t want to, so I would appreciate it if you left me alone.”

He smirks. “You’re a feisty one, aren’t you?”

He leaves the martinis, and as he turns to walk back to the bar, he says, “You’ll change your mind.”

I mutter under my breath, “Not in a million years.” But I reach for the drinks and help myself.

That was probably a stupid move. But I feel like taking my frustration out on someone, and this guy is the only one here.

When Race returns, and I tell him what just happened, he sizes the man up with a glint in his eye.

“Do you think he assumed I’m gay? I could be your boyfriend for all he knows.”

Race and I bust a gut over that. I slide one of the martinis over to him, and we toast. I sip mine, ruminating on the idiocy of

men.

“That’s the problem with these big business-type men,” I yell. “They rule the corporate world and board rooms and think they can enter a bar and rule the women in it. I bet Brando is just like that guy, thinking he can buy anything he wants, including women.”

I toss back the last of my martini, and Race nods in agreement. I see the waitress coming to the table with two more martinis we did not order.

I groan. “This guy just cannot take no for an answer.”

Well, if he’s going to send the drinks, we will drink them. This time, I down my drink in one swallow. I tip the empty glass in the businessman’s direction and then lean into Race.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” I say. Race gives me a thumbs up, nodding his head to the music.

On my way back from the restroom, the man who was sending me drinks is waiting. He grabs my arm and gets in my face. He’s solidly drunk now. I shouldn’t have accepted all those martinis, but I couldn’t help myself. It was too convenient to blame him for the woes of the world after the shitty day I had.

I could have anticipated it would end this way.

Which is why women like to go to the bathroom in packs. There’s strength in numbers.

I try to pull my arm out of his grip, but he’s got a tight hold. I lean away from his rancid breath and spittle.

“Let go of me!” I yell at him over the noise of the bar.

“Come on, just have a drink with me, and you’ll see what a great guy I am.” He’s leaning in and murmurs in my ear, “Once you’ve had a taste of me, you won’t want anyone else.”

He snorts at his lame joke.

I throw up a little in my mouth and grab his fingers in an attempt to peel them away from my arm to no avail. I yank hard, though it’s futile. Race notices us, and he quickly makes his way through the crowd.

“Dude, get your hands off my girlfriend.”

Race is masculine and big, with a deep voice and broad shoulders.

The man loosens his grip on my arm and looks incredulously at Race.

“Come on, I know she’s not your girlfriend.” His voice is dismissive. “She wants a real man, not some twinkle toes fairy.”

He laughs and pulls me closer. I finally manage to yank my arm away when his grasp loosens for a second, and I step back. Race gets in his face, and the man pulls back and attempts to punch him. The guy is too drunk and misses his face, hitting Race in the shoulder.

“That was the weakest punch I have ever seen in my life. And you call me twinkle toes! Words are spells, my friend, didn’t you know?”

The man shoves Race, who bumps into me. Race grabs the man by the collar and thrusts him back. They struggle, bumping into people and spilling drinks until the bouncer comes over and grabs the businessman by the back of his suit jacket.

“Let’s go, douchebag.”

And with that, the bouncer hauls him out of the bar while the man yells, “You don’t know what you’re missing!”

I laugh as he stumbles while being dragged toward the exit.

The crowd dies down, and Race and I look at each other, wild-eyed and hearts racing. What the hell was that?

“We should go.” Race slurs his words and weaves a bit. I agree, and we leave the bar.

“What do you want to do when we get home?” I ask. We briefly talk about watching a movie but finally settle on crashing for the evening. I wouldn’t have been able to stay awake for a commercial, let alone a movie.

We are chatting as we wait for our ride home when I spot Brando in a horse carriage. I try to look without looking. Yep, that's him. I catch a glimpse of long hair and figure he's on a date. Either I'm very drunk, or my stomach twists for another reason. The thought of a woman in his life causes tiny electric currents to dance in my belly.

Jealously, perhaps? I chase the feeling away.

Our car arrives, and I get in and put my head on Race's shoulder, content.

"Thank you for defending my honor tonight," I whisper.

Race grabs my hand. "Anytime, milady."

We laugh all the way home.

As soon as I'm in my room, my head hits the pillow, and I'm asleep instantly.

That night I dream about Brando, his lips on mine, his hands trailing my back. I'm in my coffee house. It has been renovated to resemble a spaceship. Brando is chasing me down a hallway that never ends, getting closer while I'm running in place. I try to duck into a door, but it's locked. They are all locked, and I'm trapped in this bizarre world, trying to break free.

I wake up startled, sweating, and breathing hard.

But instead of feeling terrified, there is a warm, tingling sensation spreading from my core.

CHAPTER 6



BRANDO

AFTER TALKING TO MY FATHER, I FEEL AGITATED. I PICK UP Addison from home for our movie and dinner date, trying to hide my irritation. She is excited and waits for me at the door. I let myself be carried away by her good mood.

“Hi, pumpkin. Are you ready for our night on the town?”

This day has drained me, but I don’t want to disappoint her. She’s been looking forward to our night out, and if I’m being honest, I could use a few hours off from work. Buying the building from Ana made me painfully aware of what I’ll be up against when she shows up at the office tomorrow. But once those papers are signed, I’ll be one step closer to expanding the business the way I envisioned.

“Let’s go, sweetie. We don’t want to be late,” I say.

As we leave, Addison hugs Megan, her nanny, who has cared for her since she was born. She hugs her back and wishes her a good time. Megan has been the only mother figure Addison has known, and they have grown close.

We walk to the elevator, take it down to the garage, and then use the side door to exit onto the street. It’s a beautiful night, and we walk through the park, chatting the entire way to Parm. Upon entering, we request a table by the window.

“So, sweetie, what catches your eye?” I ask, perusing my own menu.

“Pizza,” she replies, and I shake my head.

“No, remember, we had pizza for lunch? Choose something else.” The waiter approaches us to take our order.

“I’ll have the eggplant parmigiana and a salad, and she’ll have...” I pause, waiting for Addison to make her decision.

“I’ll have spaghetti with tomato sauce,” she says with a smile.

“And a side of broccoli,” I add firmly.

I have no idea where she puts all this food. It’s as if she has a hollow leg.

Our dinner arrives, and we enjoy our meal while observing people around us. People-watching has become one of our favorite activities.

After dinner, we head to the movies, Addison chattering away about a cute new backpack her friend received for her birthday, Ariana Grande’s latest album, and the Babysitters Club book series. I listen with one ear while expertly navigating the bustling 57th Street toward the movie theater, ensuring I don’t lose her in the crowd. Somewhere between West 72nd and East 57th Street, I’m fairly certain I agreed to take her to the upcoming Taylor Swift concert at Madison Square Garden. But I needn’t worry; if I did, Addison will surely remind me no later than tomorrow.

At the theater, we grab popcorn and find our seats. Addison’s excitement about watching the movie is evident as she accidentally bumps into me, causing popcorn to spill onto the floor. She gazes at me apologetically and settles into her seat as the lights dim and the movie begins. I reach over and reassure her that it’s okay, and just like that, her worried expression transforms into a smile. I wonder if I was similar as a child, always eager to avoid disappointing my dad.

The theater is filled with kids around Addison’s age, whisper-talking and unwrapping candy. I let the chatter wash over me and smile. Some of them have clearly seen the movie before. Parents’ attempts to hush their kids are futile.

“That was amazing, Dad! Can we come back and watch it again?” Addison chirps as the final credits roll and the lights

come on. I chuckle. We haven't even left the theater yet. I tousle her hair.

"Maybe," I reply, and she jumps up and down with a squeal of delight.

After the movie, we head home, and Addison hums the theme song's melody. There is less pedestrian traffic now, and I take a moment to observe the city. The scent, the visuals, and the way traffic—or the absence of it—transforms the environment always surprises me. I adore this city and all it has to offer.

As we pass the Park Lane Hotel, something catches my eye. I do a double take. Inside Harry's bar, I spot Ana with the same man from this afternoon. He must be her boyfriend. They seem to be engaged in conversation with another man.

"Dad, can we ride the carriage before we go home?" Addison's initial question goes unnoticed as my attention remains fixed on Ana. I can't help but wonder about their relationship.

"What, sweetie?" I lean closer to Addison, keeping an eye on Ana.

Addison points toward a horse-drawn carriage, and I glance over. "Oh, yeah, sure." Carriage rides in New York City are not uncommon, especially at night. The carriage Addison chooses is white, adorned with lights, and resembles something out of Cinderella's story. A majestic Clydesdale horse, tan and beige, is harnessed to the carriage with illuminated reins.

We make our way over to the horse, and I retrieve my wallet to pay the coachman. Assisting Addison as she climbs into the open carriage, I follow suit. As we settle in, I notice Ana leaving the bar with the man, their arms intertwined as they stumble and share laughter. A pang of jealousy strikes my gut. But why am I feeling this way?

I think back to the interview and how she looked. She is still wearing the same pantsuit from this morning. It clings to her body in all the right places.

A tug on my arm and a girl's giggle jolt me out of the thought.

The horse is pooping while walking, which is making Addison laugh and hold her nose. I hold my nose as well, laughing along.

It's probably for the best that Ana has a boyfriend. The physical pull I feel toward her is like a gravitational field. But she is my employee now and off-limits.

My focus must remain on my firm, especially as I'm figuring out a way to take full control of it. With that thought solidly in my mind, my body begins to relax.

The carriage whisks us through the enchanting expanse of Central Park. The lights of New York City's skyline twinkle with an awe-inspiring display of colors, resembling a vibrant tapestry. Majestic skyscrapers tower with their windows aglow, blending into a tapestry of pulsating light.

In an unexpected moment of amusement, the horse decides once more to relieve itself on the street, causing us to erupt into fresh fits of laughter. Despite the brief interruption, we continue to gaze at the magnificent city skyline, its brilliance captivating our gaze as the carriage ride draws to a close. The driver skillfully parks the horse, and I disembark to assist Addison.

As we enter our penthouse apartment a short while later, I call out, "Addison, go brush your teeth and put on your pajamas. I'll be in to say goodnight shortly."

Still on a high from our evening, she scurries off to her room.

Glancing at my phone, it's impossible to ignore a reminder for my Skype meeting in fifteen minutes. I retrieve my laptop from my bag and set it up in the kitchen, ensuring it's ready to go once I finish tucking Addison in for the night.

"Are you ready for bed, pumpkin?" I inquire, hearing a garbled response that I interpret as an affirmative. Lowering her comforter and dimming the light, I sense her approaching presence as she enters the bedroom, leaving a hint of fresh mint in the air. She wears her flannel pajamas and fuzzy lavender slippers, a birthday gift from me.

Taking a seat on her bed, I patiently wait for her to climb in. But before she does, she leans in and embraces me tightly. It catches me off guard and tugs at my heartstrings.

“Thank you so much for dinner and the movie, Dad. I love spending time with you,” she says, her voice carrying a touch of emotion. I reciprocate the hug with equal intensity, holding on as if my life depended on it. This incredible girl is the essence of my being.

“Me too, sweetheart,” I reply, leaning back and observing her, gently smoothing her hair. Each day, she resembles her mother more and more. A smile dances on my lips as I cherish the sight before me.

She slips beneath the covers, clutching her stuffed elephant. Though she’s on the cusp of adolescence, the allure of toys still holds its charm. With their boisterous mix of emotions, the tween years have been bewildering at times as she navigates the delicate balance between childhood and adulthood, grappling with unexpected and unpredictable feelings.

My heart swells with warmth. I carefully pull the covers over her and her stuffy, kissing each of their heads and bidding them goodnight. Pausing at the doorway, I glance back to find her with closed eyes, drifting into slumber. I leave the door slightly ajar and switch on the night light before retreating to the kitchen.

Grabbing a glass of water, I settle down at the computer, ensuring my headphones are within reach. I dial into the meeting, listening to the familiar beeps until it connects me with the board president.

“Good evening, Brando,” the president’s voice resonates with a stiffness that suggests he just unwrapped it from a box. As my face appears on the video, I hastily put on a mask to hide signs of my disdain. While I can’t stand him, I remind myself to keep my emotions in check to avoid potential repercussions.

“Hello,” I respond, hiding my irritation. “How’s it going?” I inquire, eager to conclude the conversation as quickly as possible. The lateness of the hour weighs on me.

Seemingly attuned to my thoughts, the board president retorts, “Considering the time, let’s get on with it. We’re curious to hear about your plans for the newly acquired building. Did you encounter any difficulties during the acquisition?” His tone reveals a hint of contempt, suggesting that he must have consulted my father. Unlike me, he doesn’t feel compelled to mask his emotions. The murmurs of agreement from the other board members follow his question.

“I didn’t encounter any issues while purchasing the building, although I did exceed the budget slightly,” I respond. Despite my efforts to maintain composure, my jaw clenches—an unfamiliar habit that has recently developed. If only the board and my father could back off for once, it would alleviate much of my tension and significantly improve the quality of my life.

“We can discuss the budget tomorrow, but any purchase exceeding our preset limit must receive prior approval before you make any transactions on behalf of the company,” the board president asserts.

I refrain from commenting on his statement.

“This is New York City. Good real estate is hard to come by,” I begin. “We’ll renovate the building, adapting it to our intended purpose. It previously operated as a coffee house until its recent closure.”

“How much do you intend to spend on these renovations?” he interjects, his disapproval palpable.

Perhaps he’s in dire need of a vacation.

I sigh audibly, attempting to maintain composure. “I don’t have the exact figures, as I have just acquired the building and need to conduct inspections and assessments. However, as I mentioned earlier, the costs should be within my initial expectations. I’ll provide you with the figures in the next few weeks,” I respond.

Keep it together, Brando. The board already has a bias against you; don’t give them any further ammunition to complicate your life.

“Fine. Please elaborate on your plans for the building. We need to be aware of the projects that will occupy that space,” he insists.

“I have several green initiatives in mind for some of our pipeline contracts, and I also plan to establish a charitable foundation, which would be headquartered in that building,” I state, my breath stuck in my throat as I brace myself for potential resistance.

“We will need to approve those projects once you provide us with the details. It doesn’t appear that you have a concrete plan in place for any of them,” he responds.

Inwardly, I contemplate the futility of presenting any proposal when everything I suggest is met with rejection.

“The board will convene again in one month to review the plans you come up with,” he adds, preempting any further response from me. “And Brando, don’t forget, if you fail to meet the deadlines or the criteria, we won’t be able to grant our approval.” With that, the board president concludes the call, leaving me staring at a blank screen.

My hand clenches into a tight fist, the pressure of my nails leaving half-moon imprints on my palm.

It’s time to dissolve this blasted board and gain control of my company.

I rub my hands over my face and run them through my hair before closing the lid of my laptop. A hot shower and a good night’s sleep seem like the remedy I desperately need.

I enter my master suite, adorned in shades of gray and black, and twist the faucet, allowing the hot water to flow. Shedding my clothes, I step into the steam-filled shower. Positioning myself beneath the invigorating spray, I lean against the wall, letting the day’s frustrations dissolve in the warmth of the water.

Taking hold of the soap, I lather my body, my mind drifting toward tomorrow. Imagining the outline of Ana’s curves, my body responds. My dick is standing up, tall and throbbing. I stroke myself, imagining Ana’s mouth and eyes on me. As I

lean back, the water hits my chest, and I continue to fist my cock. I see Ana's naked breasts with pebbled nipples and imagine pulling her up against me. I lick water off her chest as she continues to rub me. Sliding my hands down her silky skin, I find the other telltale sign she's aroused. She is wet and slick and ready for me. I imagine turning her to face the wall, sliding into her easily, and grabbing her tits. I'm ready to come, squeezing tighter, stroking faster, imagining it's Ana's pussy wrapped tightly around me.

With a grunt, I release into the streaming water while waves of orgasm shudder through me.

I rinse and dry off, then fall into bed naked. I'm asleep instantly, thinking of her.

CHAPTER 7



ANA

THE ALARM BLARES AT ME AS I FUMBLE FOR THE SNOOZE button. I'm drowsy, my head weighs twenty pounds, and it's throbbing. Did I dream about a spaceship?

I should drink less when I go out with Race.

Fifteen minutes later, the snooze alarm harshly awakens me, and I squash the offensive sound by turning it off. Finally, I get up and stumble to the bathroom. Raccoon eyes framed by a rat's nest glare at me from the mirror. I'm woozy and barely make it to the toilet in time.

Ugh.

I wash my face and rinse my mouth with Listerine, which makes me feel a little better. After tying up my hair and putting on yoga pants and a tank top, I take my purple mat into the living room, unroll it, and stare down at it, willing myself to do the routine.

My usual morning sequence is rough at first. The room spins, and I lose my balance several times. I gulp down cool water and ultimately make it through without passing out. After taking a shower, I finally feel human again.

When I return to my room, Race is sprawled on my bed, arms akimbo. When did he manage to crawl in here and why? I shake him awake as I walk by. He lets out a groan, and I decide he needs some motivation.

I poke him in the ribs with my finger, and he lets out a high-pitched scream, causing me to double over in laughter.

“Don’t make me move too fast, or I’ll throw up on your bed,” he warns, rolling over. I continue to laugh at him as I start rummaging in my closet for one of the outfits we bought yesterday.

“Which one?” I hold out the pants with a matching jacket and a skirt and top. Race grunts and points to the pants. Relieved he chose that one, I change quickly, blow-dry my hair, and lightly apply my makeup. I step back and examine myself. The pants are long and in need of some statement shoes. On my way out of the room, I grab a pair of four-inch heels. Race is still curled up like a baby on my bed. I grab my purse, kiss him on the forehead, and walk out the door.

I call a Lyft and ask the driver to stop at the last neighborhood coffee shop. I order three coffees, hoping that my new coworkers are java lovers. I decide that if they aren’t, they must be aliens.

That would explain the spaceship dream from last night.

Walking the few blocks to the office, a sense of gloom washes over me. My new reality feels like rubbing myself with sandpaper. Eyes burning, I bite my lower lip to hold back the tears. Although I stubbornly repeat in my mind that it’s going to be the best day ever, I don’t believe it one bit.

It’s going to be a lousy day.

To top it all off, my shoes are killing me. I make a mental note to wear flats next time. Heels have never been my ally.

But then again, looking as if I am six feet tall next to a six-foot-four titan might be worth the discomfort.

I step into the quiet lobby and head straight to the bank of elevators on my right. Joining a small crowd, I survey the group. Everyone is dressed in formal business attire, their attention fixated on their phones. If they are not hunched over their phone, they are zoned out, AirPods plugged into their ears. Not a single person is engaged in a face-to-face conversation.

I believe in social interaction, conversation, and personal attention. That’s what my business was all about, and it thrived

on those principles. I had created a space where people could connect and build relationships. I knew my clientele, and they knew me. Leave it to the corporations to create zombies out of their employees.

The elevator finally arrives, and I step into the car, my heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and nervous anticipation. The heels give me confidence despite the slight wobble in my step. While I won't be quite on eye level with Brando, these shoes do bring me considerably closer.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with my new colleagues, I watch the numbers on the elevator light up for each floor. As the elevator ascends, I can't help the flutter of nerves. The 99th floor feels like a world away, a realm where big decisions are made and the corporate machinery hums with precision.

The elevator doors slide open, and I step into a realm of polished floors, glass walls, and buzzing energy. Taking a deep breath, I put on a cheery face.

“Good morning, Charlotte. I took a chance that you might enjoy some coffee.” I hand her the cup.

“Boy, could I use some! Thank you.”

I knock on Brando's door. I hear clicking on the keyboard and a curt, “Come in.”

He's engrossed in a stack of papers, a frown of concentration on his face. As he sees me, for the briefest of moments, his eyes turn dark and graze me from head to toe. Then he snaps out of it, lighting up.

“Ah, Ana! Good morning. Come on in.”

I enter his office, holding a cup of steaming coffee. “Good morning. I thought you could use some fuel to kick-start your day.”

He smiles gratefully. “You read my mind. I've been buried under these contracts.”

I set the cup on his desk. He grabs it right away, takes a long sip, and thanks me. He nods and returns to his keyboard.

I walk out of his office and settle into my chair, eager to soak up the energy of my environment and fit in. Charlotte joins me, her own cup of coffee in hand.

“You’ve really brought your fashion A-game today. Looking sharp!” She grins, eyeing my outfit.

I laugh, a hint of self-consciousness coloring my cheeks. “Well, I figured if I’m entering the corporate world, I might as well dress the part. But I can’t promise I won’t be kicking off these heels by the end of the day.”

Brando’s voice interrupts our bonding as he steps out of his office, holding a large file. “Ana, please make photocopies of this file. We have a board meeting tomorrow; I need fifteen copies. Also, we have the closing later this morning. Please ensure that your lawyer has reviewed the paperwork and has made any necessary changes on his end.”

I meet his intense gaze, taking in his expression. He is either focused or upset, it’s difficult to tell. His hazel eyes are sharp and clear, and frown lines appear between his brows. I accept the folder, but before I can even open it to check for any questions I might have, he’s back in his office behind a closed door.

I sigh. But in his defense, what questions could I possibly have about making fifteen copies of a file?

“Is he always like this?” I look at Charlotte, hoping for a no.

“Brando is up against the board and his father, and he’s raising his daughter on his own. He has a lot on his plate. Don’t let him scare you off.”

I chuckle. “It takes a lot to scare me off.”

“Good,” Charlotte responds, turning her attention back to her computer.

I take a sip of my cappuccino and ruminate about my coffee house. I take a few moments to wonder what I would be doing right now. Glancing at the clock, I note I would probably be ordering inventory. I set the cup down, pick up the file and walk over to the copier room. Out of curiosity and eagerness to learn as much as possible, I make an extra copy for myself.

Due to the foot traffic, the incessant ringing of the phone, and the meeting to finalize the sale of the building, I don't get to read the file for some time.

During a lull, I grab another cup of coffee and sit back down to peek into the documents Brando asked me to copy.

To my surprise, they outline a plan to revolutionize the business through green initiatives, making it more environmentally friendly and efficient. One of the documents is a proposal for a foundation that would give back to the community. He wasn't fibbing yesterday when he told me about it. As I flip through the pages, it becomes clear that it's a solid plan. I wonder why the board and his father are pushing back on it.

It's surprising to see a different side of Brando. I had pegged him as a corporate shark, greedily taking whatever profit he can. However, these documents reveal that he is also looking to contribute to more than his own pocketbook. While his father's company operates with outdated and inefficient processes, Brando's plan aims to bring the business into the twenty-first century. His proposal includes initiatives to eliminate paper waste, introduce electronic processes, make use of artificial intelligence and technology to improve efficiency, and reduce pipeline waste by nearly one hundred percent.

With this document, in one fell swoop, Brando went from being a money-hungry tycoon to a philanthropist. I may have to reconsider how I feel about him.

I reprimand myself. He might be heart-throbbingly handsome, but he's way too old for me.

As I start conducting research and gathering information that might be useful, thoughts of him swirl through my mind. His proposal to the board reveals a different side of him, and I watch as my initial barriers crumble.

Hold your horses, lady. It's only your first day.

I discover that the board's main concerns revolve around the viability of the new initiatives and their legal implications.

Gathering information related to business law, I organize my research and begin typing. I can't stop myself from adding an idea for a green initiative I heard some folks in Australia have implemented that allows ordinary citizens to trade alternatively generated energy among themselves using blockchain-based trading systems. It turned out to be wildly lucrative for the firm that put the trading system in place, and it could be just what Brando would want to add to his new project portfolio.

Perhaps there's a straightforward way for Brando to achieve his goals of maintaining profitability, while at the same time moving the company profile toward green energy .

Interrupting my thoughts, the phone rings once again. It feels like the hundredth call of the day.

On the other end is a woman with a sultry voice, asking to speak to Brando. Her curt and borderline rude demeanor tempts me to hang up on her. However, reason prevails, and I put her on hold while I press the intercom button.

"Brando, you have a call. She says it's urgent," I inform him. The call light remains steady, indicating that he has picked up the line.

"Thanks, Ana," I sarcastically mimic Brando's voice.

The woman's demeanor on the other end leaves me pondering whether she's a girlfriend or a client, and a strange sensation akin to possessiveness washes over me. I wonder if he has multiple girlfriends. According to Charlotte, he's single. But surely, he must be dating someone. Does he have a preference when it comes to hair color? Blondes, brunettes, or redheads? I imagine the woman on the phone as a brunette.

Why am I even thinking about who he dates? He's not my type. And he's way too old for me.

I refocus my attention on my research, determined to clear my mind of any thoughts concerning Brando. Whatever this feeling is, I have no intention of acting upon it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Charlotte's gaze on me. I realize that she asked me a question while I was lost in

thoughts.

Stop daydreaming!

“I’m sorry, Charlotte. Did you say something?” I inquire, hoping to catch up on what I missed.

“Do you want to grab lunch?” Charlotte chuckles.

“Sure,” I respond, glancing at the clock. It’s past one already. My stomach growls loudly, prompting a laugh from Charlotte.

“It appears I’m pretty hungry. Skipped my usual breakfast this morning.”

Charlotte notifies Brando through the intercom about our lunch plans, and we grab our purses before heading to the elevator.

“I know a great restaurant just a block away. It’s reasonably priced and has delicious food,” she suggests.

“Sounds perfect,” I reply, taking a moment to send a quick text to Race, updating him on how my first day at the new job is going. He responds with a thumbs-up emoji.

Arriving at the restaurant, we find a booth and order water along with our choice of salads.

“So,” Charlotte begins, “Brando mentioned that you used to own your own business—a coffee house, right?”

“I did. The building was in my family for three generations. It started as a diner. When I inherited it, I transformed it into a coffee shop,” I explain, hearing a hint of nostalgia in my voice.

My curiosity piqued, I inquire, “How long have you been working for Brando?”

“Well, I initially worked for his father for a couple of years before he retired. When Brando took over the business, he asked me to stay on for my knowledge and to ensure continuity,” Charlotte replies.

Our salads arrive, diverting our attention momentarily as we start to eat.

Before taking another bite, I ask, “How well do you know him?” Charlotte smiles and leans in closer.

“He’s a lot like his father in many ways. Difficult to read at first, but once you break through his exterior, he can be quite charming.” She lowers her voice, adding, “Rumor has it that he’s the ‘love ‘em and leave ‘em’ type, not one for commitment. And he’s not really one for idle chit-chat around the office.”

I allow myself a moment to consider his playboy reputation before refocusing my attention on the present.

“Oh, that explains a lot. I thought maybe I’d done something wrong even though it’s only my first day.”

“No, he hasn’t mentioned anything specific about you. He’s just like that,” Charlotte responds. “But I could tell he was intrigued when you came to interview. He’s never hired anyone on the spot as he did yesterday. And some really good applicants came through before you arrived at the last minute.”

Relief washes over me. It’s nothing to do with me or anything I’ve done.

“Well, I’ll have to win him over with my charming personality,” I say with a grin, and both Charlotte and I chuckle.

“So, tell me about yourself,” Charlotte asks. “Are you married? Do you have kids?”

“No, I’m single,” I reply. “I wanted to focus on starting my business first and then think about settling down. I still have a few more years before the biological clock starts ticking. And what about you?”

“I’m married, and we have a couple of rugrats and a dog,” Charlotte responds. “You know, the typical, two-point-five kids. I count my husband as the half-kid.” We both laugh.

Finishing our salads, we settle the bill and head back to the office. Despite my heels, the walk rejuvenates me.

This day is turning out to be quite bearable, a far cry from the shit show I was bracing for in the morning.

Upon returning to the office, I dive back into working on the blockchain energy trading project brief. The more I dig into it, the more excited I am about it.

I hope Brando considers adding it to the board proposal.

CHAPTER 8



BRANDO

“DAD! WAKE UP!” ADDISON’S VOICE PIERCES THROUGH MY dream, accompanied by my bed shaking. In my groggy morning confusion, my first thought is that we are having an earthquake.

Except earthquakes are rare in New York.

I chase away my slumber and realize Addison’s vigorous jumping on my bed is causing the earth to tremble.

How can a twelve-year-old be this silly?

“Addison!” I groan and roll over, trying to go back to sleep. But she pushes on my shoulder insistently. Addison is a morning person, something she did not inherit from me. She pokes me again, and suddenly, I grab and tickle her. She squeaks in surprise, then breaks into laughter.

“Dad, stop,” she squeals, “you’re going to make me pee my pants.”

Oh, no! I wouldn’t want that!

I stop and let her snuggle into me.

“What’s for breakfast today?” I ask, my arm draped over her. She hesitates for a moment, contemplating her options before settling on cereal.

“Okay, get dressed, and I’ll fetch the bowls.”

The mornings are the best part of my day, always reserved for Addison and me. She trots into the kitchen and climbs onto the

stool at the counter. I pour her a bowl of Cheerios with oat milk and sit beside her.

“Did you finish your homework, pumpkin?”

With a mouthful of cereal, she mumbles a yes.

“What’s happening at school today?” I prompt her.

She swallows and reminds me about her history test.

“Did you study?”

She nods, simultaneously scooping another spoonful of cereal into her mouth. I reach for a napkin and gently wipe the milk off her chin.

“What time are you coming home tonight?” she asks, twirling her hair—an anxious habit I’ve recently noticed.

“Not sure yet, sweetheart,” I reply, momentarily forgetting my date with Veronica. I quickly correct myself, saying, “I will be home for a short while before dinner, but then I need to go out again.”

Her expression falls.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to make it up to you, though.” I give her a comforting rub, then gather our bowls and head to the sink to rinse them. Megan will take care of them when she brings Addison home from school.

“Good luck with your test today.” I kiss the top of her head before heading to my room to dress for work.

Once I drop her off at school, I head to the office. I arrive earlier than usual, full of energy. There was minimal traffic on Riverside Drive, and I had a restful night’s sleep. In fact, it was the best sleep I’ve had since taking over the business.

Feeling energized, I review the paperwork for the purchase of Ana’s building. I need to visit the location today to have a closer look. Setting the file aside for now, I send my father the draft proposals I’ve been working on, hoping to discuss them before the board meeting later today.

The elevator dings, and Ana’s voice carries to Charlotte, mentioning coffee. I hope she brought me a cup like yesterday.

Just as I think this, there is a light knock on my door.

“Come in,” I reply, busily clicking away on the keyboard.

She enters, placing a cup of coffee on my desk as she says, “Good morning.”

I could get used to this.

Her presence makes me feel a spark in my belly that is slowly churning into a smolder. Dangerous and inconvenient. She hesitates for a moment, as if feeling the weight of my gaze, then walks out. I settle back into my chair, chasing away the thought of claiming her right here on my desk. Instead, I take a sip of the coffee she brought me—an oat milk cappuccino with two squirts of vanilla syrup, just the way I like it. Charlotte must have informed her of my preferences.

The coffee is exquisite, and so is she in her blue dress, leaving a subtle trace of perfume behind her.

She both annoys and confuses me, but I will myself to focus on my work.

I’m irritated by the business merger my father initiated before retiring. But if I am ever going to develop a fondness for this company, I must implement new projects and revamp internal processes. However, the board and my father are resistant to change and consistently oppose all proposals for modernization. They prefer to remain entrenched in the past because that’s what has worked for them. Fear is driving their business decisions, rather than considerations for the company’s future.

My attorney advised me to work on quietly persuading several larger shareholders to sell me their shares, and I immediately jotted down the people who are most likely to sell. That would finally give me the control I need to run this business the way I envision.

I glance at the clock and realize I’m late for my appointment with the board. Storming out of the office, I brace myself for a difficult meeting and am not disappointed. The room is tense, and everyone avoids making eye contact with me. I distribute the copies Ana made yesterday and take my seat across from

the board president, at the end of the long oak table. I unbutton my suit jacket, lean back, and prepare for the impending battle.

“We reviewed your proposals and decided we cannot approve any of them. The envisioned merger is necessary to expand our business and satisfy the shareholders, and none of your projects even come close as an alternative to it.” The board president sets down the paper he was reading, as if it carries a contagious virus.

“Going into green energy will expand our reach and will be profitable within a couple of years. Out of the numerous alternatives I presented, there has to be at least one option that will be suitable,” I say, my voice growing louder.

The room falls into silence, with the board members turning to the president, awaiting his response.

“None of them are profitable in the near future, and we don’t know if they ever will be. It’s a pie in the sky. In addition, the proposed modernization of internal business processes is both costly and unnecessary.”

The board members nod in agreement, like compliant followers.

Losing my composure, I forcefully strike my hand on the table. “I want Sanders International to withdraw from the merger,” my voice comes out sounding petulant, but I can’t help it. “Embracing sustainable practices is not only beneficial for the business but also for the environment. It will enhance productivity, efficiency, and have a positive impact on our surroundings. It’s an investment that will generate profits in the future.”

Why can’t these imbeciles comprehend that?

“It is your father’s desire for the merger to proceed. We do not perceive these proposals as a good fit for our company, and the costs associated with implementing them would be too high,” the board president responds.

“You fail to see the long-term benefits. Once these changes are in place, they will pay for themselves within the first five years,” I assert. All eyes shift to the board president.

“We need better numbers. Come back when you have them,” the president retorts.

“Fine,” I snap, frustration boiling within me. I seize my briefcase, yank the door open, and storm back to my office. These people are driving me to the edge. I stomp through the reception area and slam the door shut behind me, throwing my briefcase on the sofa. I gaze out of the window of my high-rise office, allowing the view to sink in and soothe me.

Everything looks insignificant from the ninety-ninth floor.

I wish the board could recognize my dedication to this company. It’s not for personal gain, but for my father’s sake. After Mom passed away, this business became his sole focus, and despite his advancing age, he dedicated himself to it day and night. As his memory started to falter, he appointed a chief executive officer and formed a board to assist him in decision-making. I’m certain he never intended for them to seize control of the company, but that is exactly how they are behaving.

I was busy with my own projects when he approached me and asked me to step in. That’s when I realized he wanted to leave me a legacy. How could I refuse? If I had known the headaches it would bring, perhaps I would have made a different choice.

Lost in my thoughts, I’m startled by a knock on the door. “Come in,” I reply, my voice sounding harsh. The door opens, and Ana cautiously peeks her head inside.

“Is it safe to come in?” Her voice is soft, yet there’s a hint of determination behind it.

“Yes, of course. Please have a seat,” I gesture toward the couch and walk over to retrieve my briefcase. Despite my outward attempt at hospitality, seeing her only intensifies the inner turmoil raging within me.

I take a seat across from her and cross my legs, striving to appear composed.

“What can I do for you?” Our eyes meet, and she hesitates, seemingly unsure if she should proceed. After a few moments

of watching her contemplate her words, she blurts out.

“How did the meeting go?”

She looks me directly in the eye, and I look away, concerned that she will divine my thoughts.

I let out a sigh. “Not good. I’m frustrated with the board and my father because they won’t approve any of my proposals to expand the business, nor any of the reforms necessary to modernize our internal business processes. It’s my responsibility to lead this company, yet they reject every idea I put forth.”

She nods empathetically.

“My father established a board of directors near the end of his tenure to assist him in making decisions. But now, that same board is actively working against me, and my father is supporting their stance. I presented several advancements, and the board dismissed them outright, citing excessive costs and too small return on investment,” I say, using air quotes. “I don’t know how to make them understand that these changes can contribute to our business’s growth and continued viability. They’d rather cling to outdated models that drain us.” I pause, realizing that I just shared my innermost frustrations with my new assistant.

“Can I ask you a question?” Ana pushes her hair back behind her ears.

“Shoot,” I say casually, trying to maintain a nonchalant demeanor.

“Why do you care so much about this business?” Her question feels like a punch to the gut, and I find myself staring at her, silently pondering the same.

“I suppose I care because my father does. This business was his creation from the ground up. He used to bring me to the office, and as I grew older, I started working here during school breaks and summers. I witnessed how much this place meant to him, the effort he poured into it, often at the expense of spending time with me as I was growing up. I also want to accomplish things that make my father proud of me and

contribute to the success of this business. Unfortunately, as it stands now, I don't even think he likes me. The board certainly doesn't."

Ana's voice carries kindness as she responds, "Breaking through that kind of old-school mentality can be challenging." I nod in agreement, knowing all too well the difficulty of the task at hand.

"I need to confess something. I made a copy of the file you gave me. Based on what I've read, I have an idea I think you might like," Ana says, surprising me with her admission. There's a hint of sympathy on her face, softening her expression and evoking an unfamiliar feeling.

"It's only your first week. How can you possibly help me?" I try to maintain a collected facade, refusing to let her presence affect me.

Fake it till you make it, right?

"Well," she reaches over and hands me a folder, "you are intent on shifting your business model toward green energy, right? And the board wants immediate profits. How about implementing blockchain technology to allow people to trade excess energy from their solar panels with their neighbors? A similar project implemented in Australia was profitable from the get-go."

She hands me a folder, and my mouth drops open.

I must be looking at her as if she hung the moon.

"Participants would be able to buy and sell energy through smart contracts. This will promote local renewable energy generation and reduce dependence on central grids. Take a look at this and see what you think."

I take the folder from her, our hands grazing and sending a jolt of electricity to my groin. Flipping through the pages, I make a mental calculation. The board would probably oppose it, but the Australian case study shows great return on investment even before any government subsidies are taken into account.

The idea is innovative and forward-looking. It is precisely the direction I want the firm to go.

I gaze at her, the stirring in my belly turning to a smolder. Unsettled, I shift uncomfortably in my chair. She meets my gaze, squirming on the couch. Could she be having the same thoughts as me?

What would happen if I were to stand up, pull her toward me, and crush my lips against hers?

I exhale, pushing away that enticing notion and returning to the present moment. “Let me look through it some more. Can you send the document to my email?”

“As soon as I return to my desk,” she promises.

After Ana leaves the office, determined to distract myself from thoughts about her, I decide to visit the building and conduct a thorough inspection personally. It’s a short walk, and the weather is beautiful, the sun shining brightly. The city bustles with its usual energy—car horns blaring, occasional shouts, and people rushing shoulder to shoulder to their destinations.

I arrive at the brick building with red shutters on the windows and unlock the door. The lingering aroma of coffee fills the air, and I inhale deeply. The espresso and coffee machines are intact, so I decide to brew myself a cup using leftover grounds. Pouring the hot liquid, I sniff it and take a sip. The label on the bag indicates it’s Hawaiian coffee, from Kona. It’s delicious, surpassing anything I’ve ever tasted before.

With my cup in hand, I retreat to the kitchen. The idea of having a space for intimate gatherings in the building appeals to me. The spacious upstairs area would make for an excellent office. I diligently jot down notes as I contemplate the renovations required to transform it.

Seated at the counter, I imagine Ana gracefully moving about, effortlessly brewing coffee, restocking supplies, and warmly greeting her customers. Her patrons must have adored her. I can see students, writers, and professionals occupying the space, comfortably seated at the tables, feeling a sense of belonging. I turn to the windows and observe people passing by. A woman stops momentarily, attempting to open the locked door before eventually shaking her head and walking

away, perhaps lamenting the loss of another neighborhood gem.

I'm well aware of the skepticism toward large corporations like mine, but I choose to disregard it. Paying attention to the detractors won't serve any purpose if I want to improve the company. All I need to do is demonstrate that we are not the villains they perceive us to be.

I retrieve my phone and open the proposal that Ana sent earlier. Carefully, I go through it, analyzing every aspect and preemptively considering potential objections from the board. Perhaps I shouldn't even bother presenting this to them.

Blockchain energy trading. This will make their heads explode for sure.

I can't even get them to approve a simple business process efficiency improvement like a paperless office.

Better to focus my energy on buying enough shares to push them out altogether. After, I'll be able to proceed with any initiative I find compelling.

But I still make a few notes for some adjustments. Rather than focusing on solar energy only, I want to expand it to allow peer-to-peer trading of any renewable energy. We should also implement systems to track both energy generation and consumption seamlessly.

Ana's proposal is insightful and aligns perfectly with the direction I envision for my business. I'm intrigued by how she was able to grasp it this fast. In addition, she noted that the use of the new building falls outside the board's jurisdiction.

I promptly send the proposal back to Ana, requesting more details about the technology itself and possible partners from the tech sector. With renewed hope, I tidy up and secure the door behind me. Excitement fills me as I anticipate what she will come up with.

As I make my way back to the office, I begin making calls to the shareholders on my priority list. Seeing myself in a position to circumvent the board completely fills me with elation.

But it's good to have a plan B, just in case.

Once I am back at my desk, I jot down an outline of a budget for Ana's idea, intending to pursue it as soon as an opportunity presents itself.

Glancing at the clock, I realize that Addison should be home by now. I conclude my work, eager to spend quality time with my daughter before my date tonight.

As I step through my apartment door, I call out for Addison and hear the sound of socked feet pounding down the hallway. Before I know it, a squealing girl ambushes me from the side.

"Dad, you're home!" she exclaims, enveloping me tightly.

I inquire about her day, asking if she aced her history test. She nods excitedly.

I give her a high-five and pull her into another warm embrace. I couldn't be prouder of her.

CHAPTER 9



ANA

SINCE BRANDO IS OUT OF THE OFFICE THIS MORNING, I USE the time to research technology firms we could partner with. Charlotte is covering the phones for a while, so that I can fully concentrate.

Engrossed in the project, I fail to notice Brando approaching my desk. The hours have flown by, and I don't recall Charlotte leaving for her break or Brando arriving at the office.

“How about I treat you to lunch today, and we can review the edits I sent you?” Brando suggests, raising his eyebrows expectantly.

Surprised by his invitation, I glance up at the big, chiseled man and agree, my heart thumping. His eyes are black whirlpools, pulling me in, and I have to remind myself he's old enough to be my father. But it's not like I had the option to refuse lunch in the first place. And getting to know him on a personal level might contribute to a more constructive work environment. So, I grab my purse and join him at the elevator.

The descent is filled with awkward silence. I nervously fiddle with my purse strap, avoiding direct eye contact. Brando stands firm, his hands folded in front of him like a statue. With each person entering and exiting the elevator, we unintentionally brush against each other. A surge of heat rushes through me, and my cheeks flush crimson.

Arriving on the ground level, instead of heading toward the main lobby exit, we venture deeper into the building,

uncovering a restaurant I had yet to learn was there. I should have requested a building tour on my first day.

As we make our way to a table, we are constantly interrupted by people eager to greet Brando. He knows a significant number of his employees by name. While it shouldn't surprise me, considering his position as the head of a large company, many of them are women. I can't help but wonder how many of them he has been involved with. My cynical side whispers that it's probably all of them. I roll my eyes at the thought. However, I do observe a softer, more personal side of him as he engages with those who stop to chat. He's amiable, cracks jokes, and asks about their families. He appears to be completely in the moment, giving his undivided attention to the person he's talking to. Witnessing this, I feel a touch of warmth and find my defenses crumbling even more.

We engage in light conversation while we eat, touching upon various changes he wants me to incorporate into the blockchain peer-to-peer energy trading project. Despite the frequent interruptions, I manage to grasp his vision and understand the direction he wishes for it to take.

Our conversation shifts to my former building, which he intends to make into the foundation's headquarters and the office space for the staff working on this and other renewable energy projects. A subtle sense of satisfaction washes over me, knowing that some of my input will remain in that building.

He asks for my opinion as to the direction he should pursue. I'm taken aback, as I didn't anticipate this question. In my experience, corporate business people tend to prioritize the bottom line and seldom seek or care for others' perspectives.

“Establishing a non-profit organization to support underprivileged children would be an excellent way to give back to the community and challenge the notion that large corporations are solely focused on profit margins,” I offer. “We could focus on a partnership with a tech firm, creating programs for kids without access to technology, and generating synergies with the renewable energy trading project.”

We finish our lunch, and as we step into the elevator, he lightly touches my back—a seemingly innocent gesture that sends a surge of heat through my skin. We ride the elevator back up to the ninety-ninth floor, and he graciously holds the door open for me. As I pass by him, my arm brushes against his chest, intensifying the flame he’s ignited within me.

Brando enters his office, and I settle down at my desk to implement the discussed changes and send the updated file to his email.

Leaning back in my chair, I reflect on the people who interrupted our lunch. Charlotte had hinted that Brando had a reputation as a bit of a player, causing me to wonder which of the women who stopped by were his lovers at one point or another. It might be my imagination, but all of them were undeniably beautiful. At the thought, a sinking feeling settles in my stomach.

Thankfully, Charlotte returns from her lunch break, providing a welcome distraction. The silence had allowed my mind to wander too much, inevitably fixating on Brando.

“How was lunch with the hubby?” I inquire, attempting to divert my thoughts and maintain a casual tone.

“It was alright,” Charlotte responds, glancing at me once again.

“Just alright?” I question aloud, curious about her subdued response.

“Well,” she turns in her seat to face me directly, her expression changing, “he got a promotion.”

“That’s fantastic!” I exclaim, a wide grin spreading across my face.

“Thanks,” she replies with a hint of mixed emotions. “But it also means I have to celebrate with his boss on Friday, and I have absolutely nothing to wear,” she confesses.

“Well, I have someone in mind who loves to shop and can work wonders in the blink of an eye. He’s a fashion buyer and personal shopper for the rich and famous,” I tease.

“Give me his name and number, and I’ll gladly accept any help I can get. Although, I’m neither rich nor famous, so I’m not sure if I can afford him,” she shrugs, her tone tinged with a touch of uncertainty.

“Don’t worry, he’ll do it for me. I’ll let him know I sent you his way,” I assure her, my giggle bubbling as I reach into my bag and hand her Race’s business card.

“Thanks,” she says appreciatively, spinning around in her chair. “I’m going to call him now while the phone lines are quiet,” she adds, picking up the receiver. “Oh, and don’t think you’re off the hook regarding that lunch with Brando,” she adds playfully, catching me off guard as Race answers her call, and she launches into a rapid conversation with him. I can’t help but smile as Charlotte talks a mile a minute, and I take out my phone to text Race.

Char is my home girl, do good by her, and I will let you give me a makeover sometime this weekend.

I smile as I wait for a text back. Race is good at multitasking, so I know he will respond before ending the call.

I got you, boo, he responds, as I go back to work with the biggest grin on my face.

CHAPTER 10



BRANDO

IN THE AFTERNOON, I TAKE A MOMENT TO REVIEW THE revisions Ana sent, which incorporated the edits I suggested during lunch. I am impressed by her extensive research and knowledge of technology firms. I hadn't expected my new assistant to be this skilled, and I feel guilty for not providing her with more details about the company's plans for acquiring a new pipeline. If she had known, she would not have been in alignment with it. I am certain that once she finds out, she will protest.

Ana is aware that I will present a second proposal to de-emphasize the renewable energy aspect, but despite my desire to fight against it, there is no way to stop it. As much as I prioritize environmental friendliness, I want my plan to be successful. After reviewing both proposals, I reach over and press the button to call her.

"Yes, Brando?" she responds promptly.

"Please come in for a minute," I request.

She pokes her head into my office shortly after.

"I want to discuss your idea," I state, motioning for her to join me on the couch across from my desk.

Once she is seated, I begin, "Your proposal is interesting, but I know the board will never approve it as it is. As I mentioned at lunch, I've been trying to make this company more efficient and environmentally friendly, but the board has always opposed me, supported by my father. And when it comes to renewable energy and blockchain, it will be too much for

them. Then there's the foundation I envision, which might just push them over the edge."

"Imagine the impact of having a non-profit organization in the heart of the neighborhood. Think of how many people we could help!" she exclaims.

I have specific plans for the office space I bought from Ana, but it's too early to go into the details before I have the majority of the shares in my name.

"I understand your perspective, Ana, but the board..." I begin to explain.

I lean back in my seat and cross my legs. I'm determined to push my plan to drastically reduce the pipeline's impact using new technology, turning it into a win-win situation for everyone involved.

"Thank you for your ideas. Let me see how far I can get with the board," I say abruptly, wanting to cut the conversation short.

Ana gasps visibly and audibly, clearly astonished. "Oh... okay."

The buzzing sound of the intercom interrupts us. Charlotte manages to save us from an even more awkward situation.

I press the intercom button and reply, "Yes, Charlotte?"

"Brando, your daughter's school is on line one," she announces through the intercom.

I never receive calls from the school during the day... ever.

"Ana, please excuse me. I need to take this call," I state, not waiting for a response. I quickly move behind my desk and pick up the office phone receiver. "This is Brando Sanders. Is everything okay?" I can't help but assume that something is wrong with her.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Sanders, but Addison is in the nurse's office with me. She isn't feeling well. She has a slight fever, a sore throat, and nausea. It might be best if someone picked her up."

“Can I please speak with her?” I ask, pursing my lips.

“Daddy.” Addison’s thin voice comes through the loudspeaker on my phone.

“Are you alright, pumpkin?”

“Daddy, I don’t feel that good. I’ve thrown up, and I feel dizzy. Can you come and pick me up?”

My heart wrenches at the sound of Addison’s weak voice. It’s rare for her to be unwell.

“I’m on my way, pumpkin,” I assure her before ending the call. I barely notice Ana standing beside my desk, her gaze fixed on a photo of Addison and me on my daughter’s tenth birthday.

“Can’t her mother pick her up?” Ana blurts out of nowhere.

“Excuse me?” I snap at her, my tone harsh. “Her mother is... unavailable to get her,” I grind out, trying not to sound too rude.

I gather my belongings as quickly as possible, attempting to make my way out the door. Ana is still standing there, and although I’m sure she wants to help, there’s really nothing she can do. The mention of Addison’s mother caught me off guard. I collect my wallet and keys while Ana hands me my jacket.

“I’m so sorry, this is inappropriate,” she mumbles apologetically. “It’s just that schools typically call the mother first,” she continues, as if possessed by an evil spirit, sounding frazzled.

Why is this woman putting her foot in her mouth? Amusement has replaced the initial shock I felt at her remark.

“I don’t mean to sound sexist, but it’s often the case. Usually, moms pick up sick children if the parents are divorced or in a situation where the father might be working,” she rambles on.

She pauses, looking at me in horror. It’s next to impossible for me to keep a straight face.

“Oh, my God, please ignore me. I’m babbling.”

She puts her head in her hands and walks toward the door, preparing to open it. It seems she has misunderstood the pictures of Addison and me in my office.

I know I don't have to explain myself, but a strange feeling of compassion drives me to do it nevertheless.

"Please don't run," I say with a laugh, grabbing her by the arm. She turns and lifts her gaze hesitantly.

"First of all, the school usually contacts our nanny since she's the one who handles pick-ups. But Megan took a sick day today and will be back tomorrow," I say, unable to stop myself.

"I'm so sorry for upsetting you like this. I truly didn't mean anything by it," she mumbles, embarrassed.

"Don't worry about it. There's no way for you to know this," I reply. "My wife passed away after giving birth to Addison. It was a challenging time, and I don't like talking about it."

"That must have been hard," Ana says in a low voice. "Addison probably asks about her all the time."

Ana's words resonate with me, and I appreciate her understanding.

"Addison asks about her mother from time to time. It's a delicate topic, and I try my best to answer her questions."

"How old did you say she is?" Ana asks softly.

"Twelve." I smile at her. "But sometimes it feels like she's going on twenty."

There's something about Ana that makes me want to share, as if my well-being depended on divulging what I knew and how I felt.

"Well, now that you're in the know, please excuse me," I say. "I need to pick up the very person I've been gushing about."

I hurriedly leave and call Tony from the elevator, confirming that he will be waiting outside the building. The drive to the school feels agonizingly slow, but when we finally arrive, I rush to the nurse's office without wasting a second.

As I make my way there, my recent conversation with Ana weighs heavily on my mind. I can't help but feel a pang of regret for keeping the project she suggested on the backburner for now. The Indigenous Initiative project that I'm presenting to the board is intended to facilitate the acquisition of a new pipeline, a decision pushed by my father. It's a situation where I'm being compelled to do something I'm uncertain about and deceive someone who doesn't deserve it.

Shaking off those thoughts, my focus shifts entirely to Addison. "I'm here, pumpkin. Daddy's here," I say with a reassuring tone as I scoop her into my arms. Despite nearing her teenage years, she curls up in my embrace, seeking comfort. After signing her out for the day and receiving instructions from the school nurse, I bring my precious daughter home to take care of her.

CHAPTER 11



ANA

HUMMING TO MYSELF, I CHECK MY BANK BALANCE ON MY WAY to work. Seeing my first paycheck from Sanders International, I realize that I've been immersed in the corporate world for a solid two weeks. Surprisingly, I haven't turned into a stone statue or transformed into a flying monkey, and I'm proud that my core values remain intact.

My thoughts of returning to entrepreneurship have been pushed aside over the past couple of weeks, as I have immersed myself in the blockchain energy trading project. On top of it, I've been enjoying working with Brando. While he's undeniably physically attractive, it's the small things in his quietest moments that truly captivate me.

"Ana, do you have plans this Saturday afternoon?" Brando asks, leaning on my desk and revealing a more relaxed side to his typically composed demeanor. There's a hint of happiness in his hazel eyes that catches my attention.

"That depends on what you have in mind," I respond, well aware of my own plans to participate in a protest against yet another pipeline.

"The company is on the verge of closing a complex and successful project... the Indigenous Initiative," Brando reveals, wearing an enigmatic expression on his face.

"You mean the top-secret project that you've kept me in the dark about, all under the code name 'II'?" I blurt out, a mixture of curiosity and frustration in my voice.

He smiles. "That's the one."

“How can I agree to celebrate something when I don’t even know what it entails?” I ponder aloud.

“I don’t think you’re going to like it, but the ‘II’ project is a pipeline development. Nevertheless, I want to invite you to lunch to celebrate its closing,” he offers cautiously.

“That’s the secret project?” I exclaim, the shock reverberating through my bones as I realize that this is the very thing I plan to protest this Saturday. “You know how much I’m against it. Why would I want to celebrate it?”

I look up at him with anger. The nerve of him, asking me to come celebrate, as if he doesn’t know it goes against everything I believe in. Meanwhile, he had me working on the blockchain energy trading project, despite never intending to present it to the board.

As much as I appreciate the financial stability this job provides, I can’t bring myself to pretend to rejoice in a business deal that goes against my values.

“We’ll be joined by Charlotte and her husband, as well as a few board members and their spouses,” Brando explains, as if that will make me feel any better about the situation.

“I won’t be able to make it,” I reply without hesitation.

I don’t say it out loud, but I would sooner accept a date from a cobra than break bread with the one-percenters who are threatening the lives of Indigenous people on their own land.

Looking stunned, Brando puts his hands in his pockets. “May I ask why not?”

“It goes against my beliefs, for one. And it’s also last minute,” I add nonchalantly, shutting down my computer as I prepare to end my workweek.

“Having lunch goes against your beliefs? And how is it last minute? It’s not until Saturday. That’s two days from now. Besides, you have tomorrow off,” Brando attempts to dissuade me while I take off my heels and slip on my Sketchers.

“You’re asking me less than forty-eight hours before the lunch, as if I’m an afterthought. You could have included me when

you asked Charlotte to make the reservation at the restaurant. Not to mention that you could have been clearer about not intending to present either the blockchain, nor the foundation proposal to the board. Besides, I already have plans.” I huff, hinting that I don’t want to spend my free time with my boss and colleagues, even though deep down, I have conflicting desires. But I need to stand my ground.

“What makes you think I wouldn’t already have a lunch date or other plans?” I ask.

I’m relieved that Brando waited until the end of the day to ask me. Pissed that he kept the pipeline project from me, I have no desire to endure him any longer than it takes for me to gather my things and leave for the day.

Following me to the elevator, Brando makes one last attempt to change my mind. I’m not sure why, but he seems determined to convince me to attend this lunch.

“Look, Ana, I’m sorry if you feel deceived because you had limited information. But I made a difficult decision that is the best course of action for the moment.”

“I wish it hadn’t happened,” I retort gruffly.

Catching a whiff of his enticing scent, I’m momentarily tempted to give in. Maybe I could still persuade him to reconsider the pipeline deal altogether. Summoning my resolve, I continue into the elevator.

“If you genuinely mean what you say and truly aspire to transform Sanders International into an environmentally responsible company, perhaps you should pay a visit to the park near Canal Street on Saturday after your little celebration. Around two o’clock.” It’s the last thing I am able to say before the elevator door closes.

BY MID-MORNING ON SATURDAY, Race and I are ready to participate in the protest against the pipeline that Brando and his cohorts are celebrating at a swanky restaurant. We want to arrive early and secure good spots, preparing to make our voices heard loudly denouncing Sanders International. I know

there's a high chance I'll be fired by Monday if the board finds out about this, but at this point, I don't care.

Slipping on my comfortable sneakers to complement my trusty yoga pants and cozy sweatshirt, I join Race in the lobby of our apartment building. He's dressed in black jeans and an Indigenous-inspired poncho, making a powerful statement. His appearance speaks volumes.

"Before you say anything, I'm fully committed to the protest today," Race declares, avoiding eye contact and keeping his focus straight ahead.

His outfit, however, tells a different story... but then again, it's the message behind the outfit that will resonate the loudest.

"And that's why you're sporting the most understated fashion statement in history," I retort sarcastically, marveling at my best friend. He's donning a bedazzled baseball cap as the crowning glory of his ensemble. Underneath the poncho, an Alexander McQueen hoodie hangs loosely around his hips. Skinny jeans, more hole than fabric, hug his legs, revealing plenty of skin. And despite his flamboyant attire, his Prada walking loafers and Indigenous accessories make it clear he's headed to a protest, not a hot date.

"I'm trying to blend in with the people. Don't judge me, Sista!" Race shoots back, playfully linking his arm through mine.

"Oh, yes, honey! Nothing says 'blending in' like bedazzled headgear." I chuckle as we step out of our apartment building and onto the bustling sidewalks of New York City.

During the few blocks we walk, Race and I engage in some people-watching, speculating about the lives of those passing by. As expected, our corner grocer shoos away pigeons from his fruit stands, attempting to protect his succulent grapes from the birds' pecking. Neither Race nor I intervene when we spot a teenager swiftly swiping an apple from the stand while the grocer is distracted. People and animals do what they must to survive. I recognize the girl—JJ—and know she's been on her own for at least two years. Once again, the social services system has failed her, placing her in an abusive situation that's

even worse than her previous one. I catch up to her at the corner, press a twenty into her palm, and smile as she looks up at me with gratitude.

When Race and I made the decision to become roommates, I quickly realized how much I valued his company, even though Race would have been perfectly fine on his own. Growing up with a strong belief in paying it forward, I take pride in participating in today's protest, standing on the side of the people fighting to protect their ancestral lands and homes, despite the fact that I work for the very business we're protesting against. Reflecting on Brando's lunch invitation, I feel a tinge of hurt and insult at being invited in the first place. If I had known that any of the tasks assigned to me were connected to the pipeline project, I would have sabotaged it from the very beginning.

However, despite my frustration, I can't deny that Brando has gradually made his way into my thoughts. Maybe it's the confidence he exudes after a successful business meeting, which contrasts with the vulnerability of a wounded child when he talks to his father. There are so many things I yearn to discover about him.

Focus on today's task: protest the pipeline, I say to myself as I continue walking.

"Honey bunny, are we heading to the protest or to have brunch with the girls? You're confusing my stomach!" Race complains, tugging at my arm.

In a state of distraction, my body instinctively guides Race and me toward our usual hangout spot, a result of my mind being preoccupied with thoughts of Brando. Suddenly, Race halts in front of me, preventing me from walking into oncoming traffic. Cars whiz by behind him as he addresses me seriously.

"Earth to Ana! Hello!" he says, trying to get my attention. "Is this about Sanders or Brando?" He smiles, but it barely registers with me.

"The protest. I'm sorry," I reply absentmindedly. "You know how bad I am with directions," I shrug, pretending not to

realize that my wandering thoughts about Brando have led us off course. “We’re close, I promise.”

As we pass by an alley, a sudden idea strikes me. “Wait here!” I exclaim, pulling away from Race. I return with a couple of milk crates. “It’s a soapbox! I want us to be seen and heard. Wouldn’t you like an advantage to say what you need to say?” I offer a milk crate to my friend.

Reluctantly accepting my gift, Race remarks, “You know I’m only doing this in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the man behind your recent moodiness.”

“Race!” I exclaim.

Once we reach Grand Street, we realize that we are among the first protesters. The organizers have secured a street block between Grand Street and 6th Avenue, east of Canal Street. In a matter of minutes, Race and I are handed bullhorns by an overly enthusiastic organizer. She shakes our hands and exclaims, “Thank you so much for your support!”

Smiling uncomfortably in response to her exuberance, I accept the responsibility of my bullhorn without any hesitation. Race and I follow the lead of other volunteers as we make our way to the center of the block. After a briefing with nearly fifty other volunteers, we all begin chanting in unison.

“Stop the pipeline! Save indigenous people! Protect our planet!”

Immersing myself in the collective energy, I raise my bullhorn high in the air and search for a spot to set up my soapbox, deliberately choosing a location slightly apart from the other protesters. Equipped with enough information to sway even the most stubborn hearts, I feel a sense of pride as I stand up for what I believe in.

“Stop the pipeline, it’s claiming lives!” I shout from atop the milk crate that I brought with me.

“Stop the pipeline! It’s claiming lives!” Protesters on the opposite side of the block start echoing my chants.

“It’s a good thing you’re here, or else they wouldn’t know what to say!” Race laughs, being the first to adopt my

catchphrases.

Positioning his milk crate a few feet away from mine, ensuring that we can easily see each other no matter how much the crowd expands, we prioritize our safety and the avoidance of any potential arrests.

“I’ll echo your words, homegirl,” Race declares, lifting his bullhorn. “Give me the signal.”

“Shut it down, lift them up!” I shout, and in perfect synchronization, Race and the crowd repeat the phrase moments after me. Shaking my head at my loyal friend, I do a double take as I catch a glimpse of a tall, muscular man in sweats and a hoodie standing across the street. He looks like he could be Brando, but with his back turned to me, I can’t confirm.

Get him out of your head, Ana. He’s your boss!

“And he’s the enemy!” I seethe under my breath just as the man turns to face me. In an instant, our eyes meet, confirming that it is indeed Brando. Stepping down from my platform, I stride toward him, my words echoing through the crowd.

“You do realize that you’re protesting against your own employer, right?” Brando remarks casually as I approach him, gesturing toward the group of protesters behind me.

“I already told you it goes against my beliefs, and I made it clear that I would be joining the protest against the pipeline deal. I believe in fighting for the rights of the oppressed and underprivileged,” I assert, my words carrying more strength than the unsteady feeling in my knees. I struggle to resist getting lost in Brando’s hazel eyes. “Stay and learn how the other half lives.”

“Why should I?” Brando snaps, covering one ear as the chants of the protesters surround us. “Everyone seems terribly angry!”

Annoyed by the air of intolerance in his voice, I retort, “Of course, they’re angry! Major corporations are bidding on and purchasing the land their families have owned for generations. No one wants to lose what rightfully belongs to their family.”

Fuming at the loss of my own family inheritance to big business, I take a deep breath. “Since you’re determined to improve the company, why not start right now?”

After scanning the crowd, Brando responds, “Fine, Ana. I’ll give you an hour.”

Motioning for Race and a few other protesters to join us, we each take turns enlightening Brando with facts he may not have been aware of about the pipeline.

A part of me hopes that he will develop a genuine interest in the devastating impact these pipelines have on human lives, all to benefit the wealthiest 1 percent.

An elderly woman, leaning on her walker for support, extends a pamphlet to Brando. I’m surprised as he attentively studies it, seemingly absorbing every word. She must have recognized him, as a murmur spreads through the crowd that a Sanders is on the protest site.

“It robs our land from the future generations of my people,” she utters, her voice trembling amid a harsh cough.

My heart aches at the sight of this frail lady feeling compelled to stand on the street for hours. Beside her, a young man provides stability, his hands steadying her as she clings to her walker.

“She gets tired easily,” the young man explains.

I exchange a glance with Brando, while the younger boy explains the reason behind her distress.

“The chemicals that flow through the pipeline seep into the land and atmosphere, making the soil nearly unusable for farming and depriving us of the means to feed our livestock and warm our homes as we need to,” he says, his voice breaking as tears well up.

A young woman approaches us, appearing no older than sixteen.

“My name is Alinta Weathervane Sharp. I am the granddaughter of our people’s chief,” she introduces herself, reaching out to shake Brando’s hand.

“Nice to meet you,” he responds, retracting his hand after the handshake.

“Our communities’ very existence is at stake,” she begins, demonstrating an impressive command of the subject. “The proposed and established gas and oil pipelines violate our rights to coexist harmoniously with our land and families. It jeopardizes our safety and autonomy. We are forced to witness corporations installing pipelines through our communities, leaving Indigenous people to either accept the pipelines on their ancestral lands or relocate to places where we don’t belong. The fact that we have no say in the placement of these pipelines on our properties sends a message that our rights can be taken away without repercussions.”

I observe Brando absorbing the weight of her words, and it seems like many more protesters are eager to engage with him. Despite being aware of his role as the head of the corporation responsible for their plight, they treat him with kindness.

Reassured that Brando is taken care of, I make my way back to my position on the milk crate and resume my chant. Glancing over at him, I suppress a smirk as I see him throwing glances in my direction while listening to the people that approach him. I can’t help but wonder how he manages to hear anything amid the blaring noise of the bullhorn.

His body posture remains the same as at the office, but his face has changed. It’s as if he’s genuinely interested. After an hour, he’s still here.

Way to go, Boss Man!

CHAPTER 12



BRANDO

AS MUCH AS I DESIRE TO SPEARHEAD GREEN INITIATIVES within Sanders International, I am humbled by the vast amount of knowledge I still need to acquire. Engaging in conversation with Ana opened my mind and unveiled ideas that have the potential to simultaneously enhance corporate profits and improve the lives of future generations. Until today, I remained oblivious to the true impact of the pipeline on the communities residing nearby.

Thankfully, I had the foresight to change my clothes after lunch, opting for comfortable gray sweatpants, an NYU hoodie, and Nike running shoes. I arrived at the protest site thirty minutes later than Ana had told me to, and I could see the relief in her eyes as she spotted me.

“Thank you for joining us. You’re more than welcome to stay and stand with us, if you’d like,” Ana offers, lightly touching my forearm.

Tell me you felt that spark!

I respond without hesitation, “How can I help?”

Surprisingly, seeing her dedication to something she’s passionate about fills me with excitement. It ignites a newfound appreciation for her. This transformation in her demeanor reveals a quality that I deeply admire.

As I join the protest, I realize that I am undoubtedly stepping into unfamiliar and potentially hostile territory.

“This certainly surpasses the excitement of my lunch,” I remark before Ana can say anything.

“I wasn’t sure if you were going to show up!” She chuckles nervously, scanning me from head to toe. “We could use some help with the heavy lifting,” she informs me nonchalantly. “And you look the part,” she adds with a smirk.

I find myself actively involved in assisting the protest organizers, aiding in the setup of barricades, and talking to them about my company’s plans.

“Hey, rich boy! Come over here and lend a hand with these coolers!” A big, young man motions toward me. “Ana mentioned you’re here to support us, so let’s get this done!”

Spending the afternoon with the people affected by the project has allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of both Ana and the protesters. This knowledge will enable me to help them in their cause.

By early evening, I realize that not only do I relish the camaraderie among the protesters, but I also find solace in being close to Ana outside the confines of our office environment.

The plan for the protest is to break off into separate groups to disseminate our information. Ana grabs me by the hand and pulls me next to her in the center group. The shouters are responsible for yelling and chanting, providing the others with something to chant in return. On either side of us are the informers, who engage in one-on-one conversations with passersby. All the people who spoke with me earlier are among them, including the older woman who is now in a wheelchair.

My spirits are uplifted. I notice people taking pictures of the protest activities. It crosses my mind that my participation will be misconstrued, but I don’t give a fuck. I want to make a statement and am more than looking forward to seeing the scandalized faces of the board.

The protest persists. Eventually, there are individuals appearing at the site voicing their discontent against the

protesters.

Unfortunately, some of the counter-protesters have turned violent, resorting to physical aggression against anyone in their path. This confrontation is heading toward a dangerous outcome as clashes are erupting between the two sides. It deeply troubles me that my company is the root cause of such anguish and suffering. If only I had fought harder against my father's demands, it wouldn't have escalated to the violence I am witnessing now.

Not only is Sanders International threatening to strip these people of their homes and well-being, but we are also exposing them to further harm. I step forward and assist in guiding as many protesters as possible away from the fights. Suddenly, our attention is drawn to a large group of police officers approaching us.

"They blame us for starting the fight," Ana shouts over to me.

"Why would they think that?"

"We are the ones disrupting the peace in their eyes. It's how it always ends up."

A police officer approaches us, with others surrounding the protesters. Some of them wield batons and pepper spray. Before anyone can react fully, the police start spraying water at us. Their aim is directed at those engaged in the clashes, but for the most part, our group isn't fighting back; we're simply trying to get away.

Glancing at Ana, I can see that she isn't frightened at all. Taking her hand in mine, we sprint toward a man being pinned to the ground by two burly guys. Soon, shouts fill the air, and the pungent stench of pepper spray hangs heavy. Now, everyone is running, including Ana and me. Still hand in hand, we reach safety, laughing as we dash down the street, evading the police. Pausing to catch our breath, I compose myself long enough to take a good look at her.

Her hair and clothes are drenched in sweat. She doesn't seem to mind, as she is laughing heartily, looking at me.

It's addictive having her this close to me. The steady, low simmer I feel around her turns to molten hot need.

Take it easy, man.

After a deep breath, I look for something to divert my attention. But there is no denying the slow swell in my pants.

I look at her captivating body, her T-shirt revealing two delicious pebbles gracing the voluptuous curve of her breast. I want to touch her.

She is your employee.

"I never would have expected this behavior from you, Ana!" I almost growl, keeping my eyes locked with hers. "Even with the police crashing the party, this entire day has been thrilling," I add.

I want to take her home, drink her in, and watch her fall apart while I fill her to the hilt.

Regaining her composure and keeping my gaze, she responds, "I didn't invite the police, but I'm glad you're enjoying yourself!"

I know another way I could be enjoying myself.

She is still looking at me, dangerously close, defiant, as if daring me. I allow myself to eye fuck her, raking her body with my gaze.

This is inevitable.

I want to take her, never mind the consequences. My hand reaches for her waist, and I pull her close. Her surprised gasp causes a roil of heat to seep through my muscles. As I become captivated by the depths of her blue eyes, I crush my lips against hers, and we both shudder.

She is tender and welcoming, parting her lips slightly and letting my tongue tease her. I press her against a building, letting her feel my hardness, as if giving her a promise.

She puts her hand on my chest and hesitates. Then she pushes me away decisively. Before I have a chance to stop her, she swiftly takes off, leaving me drenched and rock hard.

Amid the chaos of protesters rushing past and the police continuing to douse the crowd with water and pepper spray, I lose sight of her.

ON SUNDAY MORNING, sun rays peer through the shades and dance playfully on the bed covers. As I sit up in my spacious king-sized bed, I look at the clock and realize I slept way past my normal waking hour. The memory of yesterday's kiss lingers vividly, and I run my tongue over my lips, longing for another taste.

Yet, I shouldn't concern myself with romantic relationships. Even Veronica, who initially agreed to a casual liaison, became clingier and demanding. The last time we saw each other, I told her that our relationship had run its course, and that we would not be seeing each other anymore. She wasn't happy, but the only girl who deserves my full attention is my daughter.

Anticipating a kitchen covered in flour, milk, and eggs, I breathe a sigh of relief upon discovering Addison quietly enjoying her cereal while engrossed in her book. The television in the background fills the room with morning news shows.

"Dad, I placed the paper on your chair," Addison chimes in, without taking her eyes off her tablet.

Preferring a cup of coffee over food, I settle at the kitchen table, facing my daughter, and delve into the Sunday paper.

"Dad! Is that you at yesterday's protest?" Addison sounds amused as she points to the newspaper I'm reading.

Perplexed, I lower the paper, my curiosity piqued. Flipping to another page, my breath catches in my throat before eventually settling within my chest.

Fuck! Me!

But I knew this was likely to happen. Hoped for it, even.

I check my emails and see ten messages from different board members requesting an urgent meeting.

Way to go, geezers!

Grinning to myself, I set up a video call, including my father. If nothing else, he will appreciate that I am not only taking action, but also accepting responsibility for the outcome.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” I announce as soon as I have them all on my screen. I clear my throat as the board members gaze at me in terse silence.

“I presume you want to speak to me about the news,” I begin slowly. The board members remain quiet, staring at the screen.

“Granted, it is unusual for the CEO of a company to protest the actions of his own firm, but the circumstances have called for drastic action.”

The board continues glaring at me.

“As you are aware, I’ve been advocating for Sanders International to adopt green practices over the past months. By making it known that I stand against the current state of this pipeline, we can sway the public opinion in our favor,” I say, taking a deep breath before continuing.

“After hearing the concerns of the protesters, I urge you one last time to view this as an opportunity for Sanders International to embrace environmentally friendly practices. We can redesign the construction techniques, utilizing eco-friendly materials in the manufacturing of these pipes. By doing so, we will not only preserve the land through which the pipeline traverses but also minimize, if not entirely eliminate, exposure to harmful chemicals.”

The board members mumble in hushed tones. This is turning out much better than I anticipated. I have put them in front of a *fait accompli*, forcing them to take corrective action.

They voice their discontent, but they are all aware that they will ultimately have to consider my suggestion. They agree to adjourn and reconvene in two days.

For now, it seems that I still have a job.

I can only hope that Ana retains hers as well.

CHAPTER 13



ANA

FLUSTERED AND AGITATED, I PACE BACK AND FORTH IN MY room, desperately trying to calm my nerves before facing my best friend. My mind is in disarray from Brando's unexpected kiss. A kiss that I have secretly fantasized about countless times, yet it proved to be even more intoxicating than I could have ever imagined. Although I had daydreamed about being with him, the idea of him being interested in me seemed far-fetched.

Slipping on a cardigan over my sundress, I meet Race in the kitchen, as I lament, "How can I walk into the office and face him on Monday? I was already a bundle of nerves when he joined us at the protest. But for him to kiss me? And now this!" I shake the weighty Sunday edition of *the New York Times* in front of Race's face, desperately trying to prevent a full-blown meltdown. Scattered across the kitchen table are other newspapers and tabloids adorned with pictures of Brando and me.

"Girl, y'all are going to be in the paper until this blows over!"

Race draws my attention to the newspapers as I examine them more closely. Every Sunday morning, Race picks up all the big newspapers, enjoying their gossip, fashion, and society pages. While I expected the local newspapers to feature pictures from the protest, I hadn't fully considered the extent of Brando's prominence until I saw the bold headlines about him in stark black and white.

"*Playboy Philanthropist Protests His Own Company*' has a nice ring to it!" Race cackles.

“Race, this is not funny!” I snap anxiously. “As his assistant, they are putting me under the microscope, too! Did you *read* the article? They know that Sanders International bought my building, and they are saying that I am trying to take down the company from within!”

“I know what you are trying to take down, and it is within the company. I am talking about the man behind the business. Mr. GQ himself,” Race ribs pointedly. “And by take down, I mean you want to take down his pa—”

“Race, do not even finish that thought!”

Throughout the rest of the day, I continue to obsess over Brando’s kiss incessantly. But I am well aware that his kisses won’t pay my bills.

I must maintain professionalism and firmly remind Brando that we cannot pursue this further.

After all, he is my boss.

ON MONDAY MORNING, I slowly welcome the new day, aware that I will have to face Brando. I ponder how to behave toward him while enjoying my morning coffee with Race. Before, we used to hang out at my shop, but since I had to close it, we discovered another local place on my way to work. We read the daily newspapers on our phones and savor our non-dairy cappuccinos.

“Girl, something has been bothering you all week, even before this fiasco of a protest. Spill the beans!” Race urges me, prompting us to put our phones away. With Brando and I still plastered all over the internet, I wish I could book a flight to Australia and hide until the storm clears. A New York scandal wouldn’t raise an eyebrow down under.

Finally giving in to my best friend’s insistence, I confess my growing feelings for Brando. “What should I do?”

“Do what your heart desires.” He shrugs. “You deserve to be loved as much as you love yourself.”

“Right now, my heart wants me to keep my job because love doesn’t pay the bills,” I point out.

“Did you just admit to love?” Race smirks, lifting his cup and accidentally spilling some of his cappuccino.

“You know what I mean!” I chuckle nervously. “It might not be my dream career, but it comes with a steady paycheck.”

A regular income stream gives me the security I need until I gather my bearings. With the sale of my building, even after settling all the debts, I still have a good chunk of money left over to start a new business. I could open a coffeehouse, complete with a charming apartment above it for me to call home, maybe even somewhere outside of bustling NYC.

The fact that my boss is easy on the eyes doesn't hurt.

Reluctantly preparing to head to the office, I bid Race goodbye with a hug and step out of the café. As soon as I enter Sanders International, I sense a change of vibe. The office is abuzz with activity—people engrossed in phone conversations, fingers dancing across keyboards, and colleagues rushing from one interaction to another.

Barely off the elevator, Charlotte pulls me aside. Once we are out of earshot, Charlotte asks, her voice filled with trepidation, “Can you feel that?”

Nervously glancing around, I respond, “Feel what?”

“The tension! Everyone has seen the news. The board has been keeping Brando on a marathon Zoom call all morning!” Charlotte gushes, trailing behind me as I walk to my desk.

I see that I am not the only one that wants Brando's attention.

My desk is positioned directly outside Brando's office, usually allowing me to enter without knocking. Since we started working on the project, he always kept the doors open, making it easy to dash in and out. However, today is different. To my surprise, the adjoining doors are closed. I try the door, but it's locked. I pause and compose myself before walking past Charlotte and heading to my desk. While I anticipate Brando is busy, as his assistant, my intention is to convey my professional support rather than a personal one.

Not only do I have to put our public business on hold, but I also have to suppress my growing feelings for him, which

have been further stirred by his impromptu kiss. Perhaps it was the adrenaline from running away from the police officers that prompted him to do it. Once I felt his lips on mine, I couldn't resist returning the pull of his kiss.

"No one is allowed in or out unless they are on the NTK basis," Charlotte explains with a grimace, maintaining her stoic composure in her desk chair and draping a shawl across her shoulders. I admire her stylish clothes.

"NTK?" I ask, puzzled.

"Need-to-know," Charlotte replies, clicking through open windows on her screen before finally landing on her email. "Or if personally requested by Brando."

After that kiss, I *NTK* what Brando thinks!

And why exactly did I run away?

I get up from my desk. "Could you please let him know I'll be right back if he's looking for me?"

"I've got your back, babe." Charlotte smiles back at me. I smile back and start walking to the break room.

Uncertain of what to say other than the dreaded, "We need to talk," I contemplate my post-kiss introductory text as I make my way to the breakroom. Grateful for the solitude of the empty room, I retrieve my cell phone from my pocket.

Can we talk in private?

Anticipating Brando's response, I distract myself by getting a couple of coffees. Ideally, I would have created a special blend just for the two of us to share, but I can't let my romantic side override my thinking. He's my boss, and I have to keep this job.

Placing two mugs on the counter, I wait to respond to his incoming message.

Sure! As soon as I find a moment.

Taking our coffees back, I pause at Charlotte's desk. Before I can say a word, she shakes her head, indicating that there is no sign of Brando.

Charlotte is always in the loop when it comes to confirming and providing information, operating on a strict, need-to-know basis. She never reveals her sources, and everyone trusts that she has thoroughly vetted everything she shares. Never one to engage in gossip, Charlotte is the person in the office that everyone confides in.

I take a longer route around my desk to avoid being near the adjoining door. He's so close, yet so far away. A part of me wants to support him in his fight for the company and its reputation. However, I also don't want them to proceed with the pipeline. Brando shouldn't have to implement projects he disagrees with. If his father and the board continue to oppose him at every turn, I hope he considers walking away altogether. Having experienced the closure of my own business, I understand the desire to fight for what you love and the necessity of working to support oneself. I also know the joy of having a fulfilling career.

What did that kiss mean?

Placing the mugs on my desk, I send another text to Brando.

I got you a fresh cup of coffee in case you need a refill.

Suddenly, a group of board members accompanied by two interns march in a disorganized manner toward Brando's office. Before I can react, the door opens as one of the board members prepares to knock on it. I catch a brief glimpse of Brando's hazel eyes before he lets them in and quickly shuts the door behind them.

His office door opens again, and an intern rushes out, sprinting down the hallway. Soon after, three other interns follow her into Brando's office before the door closes once more.

With Brando in full damage control mode, I don't have a single moment to speak with him. We are confined to communicating through our iPhones, and even then, our responses become increasingly infrequent. To occupy my time, I handle incoming phone calls and respond to requests for comments from newspapers. It isn't until midafternoon that I finally hear from him.

I need to tell him that hooking up is out of the question.

Opening his office door, I look up to see Brando flashing me a warm smile.

“The board is asking me to hold a press conference to talk about the pipeline,” he states in a professional tone. “Join us in the auditorium at three p.m.”

Maintaining my composure, despite feeling flustered that I’ll have to postpone the conversation about the kiss once again, I respond curtly, “Sure thing. By the way, your coffee has gone cold.”

CHAPTER 14



BRANDO

FEELING THE NEED FOR A BREAK FROM THE BOARD AND MY father, I pace in front of my desk, deciding to check in with Charlotte to schedule the press conference and catch up on any missed messages. And of course, I can't wait to see Ana again.

"I'll arrange the conference for this afternoon. Have a good day, ladies and gentlemen," I announce, exiting the Zoom call. I then hold my office door open so the people inside can leave. As they all file out, I glance outside to find that Ana is not at her desk.

As I swing my door open, I'm greeted by questioning gazes from the entire office. The only pair of eyes I want to see are nowhere to be found. I make a beeline for Charlotte's desk.

"Charlotte, I need you to arrange the auditorium and contact the media for the press conference." I pause briefly. "Have you seen Ana?"

"She's in the bathroom," Charlotte responds, her eyes fixed on the computer monitor as she types an email. "When she arrived, she tried to go into your office, but the door was locked. You didn't inform me that she's on the NTK list, so—"

Chuckling, I interject, "Char, that list is your responsibility. And, of course, my assistant needs to be as informed as you are about the board's decisions."

Charlotte stops typing, giving me her full attention. "Even though she's the reason behind this specific decision?"

By now, it's common knowledge that Ana also participated in the protest. My unavailability and limited communication might be creating the wrong impression, suggesting that I don't want to see her or that her job with Sanders International is in jeopardy. Meanwhile, I constantly reminisce about the heat of that stolen kiss.

Has she been thinking about it as well? At the very least, she must have sensed the electric current running between us.

For the sake of my own sanity, I need to talk to her as soon as possible. Unfortunately, I had to spend the morning with my father and the board, strategizing how to present the situation and maneuvering them into making the decision I want.

Back in my office, I stand at the window to admire the view of the skyline. Gazing at the treetops, one can almost forget about the bustling city below. Ninety-nine stories up, amid the chaos that currently engulfs my life, I allow my mind to wander.

I envision taking Ana on a romantic helicopter ride at night, followed by a visit to a chic restaurant in the city. Later, we would go back to our hotel, and I imagine her kneeling in front of me, begging me to mouthfuck her. After, she is riding me, her breasts bouncing in my face, as she comes on my cock and screams my name.

My mind is going haywire; every thought involving Ana inevitably ends up in a vivid daydream.

Her voice ripples outside my door, abruptly pulling me back to the present. I sit behind my desk, my cock tenting my pants.

I need to get laid soon.

Ana peeks through the door. "It's almost three."

"Yes, let's get going. But first, I feel I might need to apologize," I begin, my words trailing off.

"I am sorry. But then again, I'm not sorry," I add playfully.

She gives me an earnest look. "About the locked door? No worries."

Is she deliberately talking about something else?

“Sometimes, I also need my own space and time, so I understand,” she rambles on. I have the urge to grab her and claim her. That would surely clarify what I mean.

“Let’s talk about this after the meeting,” I sigh as I stand up.

“I’m ready whenever you are, Boss Man,” she responds.

Charlotte joins us, and we ride the elevator down to the auditorium floor, an uncomfortable quiet hanging between us. I can’t help but think that we could have used this time more productively if Charlotte wasn’t with us.

I break the uneasy silence. “I’ve been transparent with the board,” I say. “I intend to tell the press that I attended the protest to gain a different perspective.”

“What do they expect you to talk about?”

“They want me to clarify my position without further damaging the company’s reputation.” I grin as I walk onto the podium. “Wish me luck!”

The room is full of journalists, though I see a few board members sitting clustered around Charlotte and Ana.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the board and the press, thank you for joining me this afternoon,” I start slowly, savoring the moment. I enjoy being on the podium. The feeling of commanding the room is intoxicating.

“I stand before you as the CEO of Sanders International, an energy infrastructure company that has been powering progress and driving innovation for years. Today, I am thrilled to announce a transformative and vital step for us and for the world we serve.”

I pause, cameras flashing.

“As you are aware, over this past weekend, I attended a protest against a pipeline recently acquired by Sanders International, and you might be wondering why I did so.”

I take a deep breath before continuing.

“It was a deliberate decision. We needed to hear from the people who will be affected by the planned project. Everyone

needs energy, yet often we enjoy its comforts without sparing a second thought about its impact on the environment.”

I stop and take stock of the room.

“As we look around us, it is evident that the world faces significant challenges due to climate change and environmental degradation. We, as leaders in the energy sector, recognize our responsibility to be a part of the solution. Our commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship has never been stronger.”

Ana is sitting in the second row, tucked in between Charlotte and one of the board members, watching me intently. She is hanging onto my every word.

“Today, I am proud to declare that Sanders International is embarking on a bold and unwavering journey toward becoming a more sustainable and environmentally friendly organization. We are taking concrete steps to reduce our carbon footprint, preserve natural resources, and drive positive change for our planet and communities.”

A low murmur spreads through the audience.

“First, we are setting ambitious targets to decrease our greenhouse gas emissions significantly. We will invest in cutting-edge technologies and renewable energy sources, aiming to transition to clean and renewable energy in our operations. By doing so, we will not only minimize our impact on the environment but also pave the way for a greener and more sustainable future.

“Second, we are committed to fostering innovation within our organization. We will create a dedicated sustainability research and development department to explore and implement new, eco-friendly solutions. By fostering a culture of innovation, we will unlock untapped potential and revolutionize the way we operate, leaving behind a legacy of positive change.”

I search for Ana’s face in the audience.

“But our efforts will not be limited to just our operations; we aim to empower our customers to make sustainable choices too. We will also explore a peer-to-peer energy trading pilot

using blockchain, to encourage our customers to embrace energy-efficient solutions and inspire them to become active participants in creating a greener world.”

Ana’s eyes widen, and she breaks into an infectious, radiant smile.

“And finally, thanks to the information I acquired at the protest, the construction of the pipeline is on hold until we find a sustainable way to build and operate it. Thank you for your time.”

As I walk away from the podium, I am not surprised to see a few board members scrambling in my direction. When they reach me, a graying man I have known since I was a child and who visited our home too many times to count, grabs me by the sleeve.

“Back off,” I growl, barely flinching a muscle.

Whimpering like reprimanded puppies, the board members in his vicinity scatter and hold their tongues as they allow me to make my exit, followed closely by my staff. Once we are outside the auditorium, I swiftly open an office door and pull Ana inside. Luckily, the office is empty.

She looks at me in anticipation, holding her breath.

“That was incredible,” she says, a mix of happiness and wonder shining from her eyes. “You did it, despite the board. Aren’t they going to be furious?”

But I’m not interested in discussing Sanders International and ignore her question. I have more pressing business with her.

“Tell me you felt it, too,” I say, grabbing her by the waist and locking her gaze to mine. Her blue eyes dance in the late afternoon sunlight pouring through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“I’m sorry for running away,” she murmurs, dropping her eyes. “You surprised me. I didn’t expect my boss to kiss me.” I gently lift her chin with my hand.

“I won’t do it again unless you ask for it,” I tell her with a playful smirk, and slowly, ever so slowly, lean in to kiss her,

testing her reaction. Her gaze is locked with mine, and she hesitates.

I hope she will make the request.

But she looks away and turns her head. With a serious expression, she replies, "That is not going to happen."

With my cock pulsating with need, I sigh and release her.

Something is holding her back. Very likely, someone.

Her boyfriend.

That man who is always at her side.

Frustrated, I release my grip.

"Let's just forget any of this happened."

CHAPTER 15



ANA

AFTER A FULL DAY AT THE OFFICE, I'M GETTING READY TO start a restorative yoga practice in my living room. Doing it on most evenings keeps me nimble and sane despite sitting on my butt the whole day.

Just as I settle into my first downward dog, Brando's name flashes on my phone.

It's been a few weeks since he announced to the world that Sanders International is going green.

And since he asked to kiss me again.

Ever since that afternoon, he has maintained a safe distance from me, while always staying friendly and respectful.

There must be a good reason that he is calling me after hours.

"Is everything okay?"

"Addison's nanny, Megan, just called me. She has a family emergency and needs to leave. I have a long meeting coming up, and it starts in an hour," Brando explains hurriedly. "All my other backup sitters can't make it on such short notice. I know you don't have any children, but do you know anyone who could watch Addison for a couple of hours?"

"She can stay with me," I offer. "Can you bring her here?"

I should have confirmed this with Race, but then again, I'm sure he will be cool with it. He is an awesome friend.

"We'll be there in fifteen."

I alert Race that we will be having a visitor, and we settle on the sofa watching *Seinfeld* reruns while we wait for Brando and Addison. Once the intercom rings, Race buzzes them up and cracks the door open.

“Welcome to our humble abode!” he announces giddily as Brando and Addison step in.

“Oh! Hi! You’re... uh, Ana’s friend.” Brando sounds uncomfortable.

“Race. We met at the protest last month.”

“Right. And this is my daughter, Addison,” Brando states as he gently sets down a backpack, encouraging Addison to follow him. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours, no later than eight. Thank you again, Ana,” he says, then kisses his daughter on her forehead. “I love you, pumpkin.”

“Bye, Dad! I love you, too!” Addison chirps back as Brando closes the door behind him. Turning her attention toward me, in a voice filled with excitement, she asks, “What are we doing tonight?”

Race and I exclaim together, “Pizza and Uno!”

The smirk on Addison’s face does not bode well for us.

JUST WHEN I anticipate that Addison may need to spend the night because Race won’t let her leave without beating her at least once, the doorbell chimes, interrupting our intense Uno battle. I jump up, a mix of excitement and nerves coursing through me. As I open the door, Brando is met with the sound of his daughter giggling.

“It looks like you guys are having fun,” Brando says with a smile, looking from Addison back to me.

“Dad, you’re just in time for the ultimate showdown! Will you take on the reigning Uno champion?”

Brando smirks, his gaze playfully challenging.

“That’s only because you always get the Wild cards, Wild Woman!” Race laughs back.

Urging Brando to step in, I close the door behind him.

His tight blue polo shirt reveals powerful arms and a chiseled chest.

I swallow, my heart skittering.

Damn! He looks good in business casual!

“Did everything go well at the meeting?” I ask in an effort to keep my head clear.

“Yes, everything went according to plan. The board should be getting off my back pretty soon.” He grins, and before I can ask him to elaborate, he changes the topic. “Enough about business. I want in on the next game. Prepare to be defeated, princess.”

Race, always quick to jump in, elbows me with a grin. “Looks like Daddy Sanders is about to enter the lion’s den. Good luck, my friend!”

I can’t help but chuckle at Race’s comment, but as I peek at Brando, I catch him stealing glances at my roommate. Why does he keep looking at Race? Maybe he is just captivated by his charm and vibrant energy.... I make a mental note to ask him.

“Alright, Brando, you’re in for a challenge,” I say, stepping closer to him, our eyes locked in a playful battle of their own.

“But be warned, Addison is the reigning champion for a reason. She’s got some seriously impressive Uno skills.”

Addison nods, her eyes shining with determination. “That’s right, Dad. You better bring your A-game.”

Brando grins, a flicker of competitiveness gleaming in his gaze. “Challenge accepted, Addison. Let’s see if I can give you a run for your money.”

We settle in at the table, and as the cards shuffle, the room fills with laughter, playful taunts, and the occasional dramatic gasp when a wild card is played. Addison’s strategic moves impress us all, while Brando puts up a valiant fight, occasionally letting his daughter win with a wink and a smile. The banter between us flows effortlessly, the quick-paced dialogue keeping the atmosphere light and amusing.

As the game reaches its climax, I steal glances at Addison, marveling at the bond we've formed in such a short time. It's as if we've known each other for ages. She is comfortable with me, and I can't help but feel a sense of protectiveness and affection toward this bright, resilient young girl.

"Looks like I've met my match," Brando admits, a mixture of pride and jest in his voice as he places a card on the table.

Addison grins, her victory dance punctuating her triumph. "Another win!"

Brando raises an eyebrow, an expression of surprise on his face. "Are you sure you're not cheating, pumpkin? I suspect some secret Uno skills you're hiding from us."

I join in the playful teasing. "Oh, she's definitely got some secret Uno powers. We've witnessed it firsthand."

The room erupts in laughter, the tension from the game dissipating. In this moment, it feels like a glimpse into a possible future world, each card played intertwining us closer.

Brando's gaze keeps returning to me, the weight of it making my body hum. I blush as his eyes drag like velvet across my face. And yet, I can't shake the feeling that there's more to the way he looks at Race, his curiosity dancing on the edge of recognition.

Brando smiles, clears his throat, and looks away, breaking the spell. "Well, it seems like we've overstayed our welcome. We should get home, little one."

Addison pouts, her eyes pleading. "Dad, can't we stay for one more game? We were just getting started!"

Race, never one to miss an opportunity, chimes in with a mischievous grin. "Yeah, Brando, we need a chance to reclaim our honor and defeat the reigning champion."

Brando hesitates, his eyes darting between Addison's hopeful gaze and me, and I'm certain he feels the undeniable chemistry buzzing between us.

"Alright, one more game. But I won't go easy on you this time, Addison. Prepare for defeat!"

“Would anyone like a fresh drink?” I offer.

“I’d love another drink. Addison, you know what I like,” Brando replies, smiling at his daughter.

Addison follows me into the kitchen, plopping down on a bar stool while I retrieve drinks and ice from the refrigerator.

“Have you been married for long?” Addison asks as I place a serving tray in front of her.

Startled, I reply, “Married? To Race?” I chuckle as she nods her head. “We are roommates. He and I have been best friends since high school.”

“Just friends?”

“Race is gay, and I am single.” I laugh.

“You guys are so fun to hang out with.” Addison’s smile flashes on her face. “It’s always just me and my dad, except for Megan.” Her eyes turn dark and watery as she continues, “My mom died when I was a baby. Dad doesn’t talk much about it, but I’ve looked at pictures.”

“That’s tough, sweetheart,” I say, pulling her in for a hug. “My father wasn’t the best communicator either. But keep asking him and give him time. I’m sure he will tell you everything you need to know.”

“Let’s get back to the game,” she says with a heavy sigh, blinking her tears away.

CHAPTER 16



BRANDO

AS I WALK OUT OF THE BATHROOM, I OVERHEAR ADDISON AND Ana in the kitchen, talking about Addison's mom. Not wanting to eavesdrop, I sigh and walk away.

Once they are back in the dining room, Addison playfully teases, "Dad, be prepared. This crown is staying right here."

I play along, a grin spreading across my face. "We'll see about that, princess. You might have met your match."

As the game progresses, the room is buzzing with laughter, shouts of excitement, and more groans. Addison's strategic moves impress us all, and I can't help but admire her skills.

I can't stop myself from stealing glances at Ana. She is breathtaking. There's a magnetic pull between us, and under different circumstances, I'd chase her and take her, without worrying about consequences. But she is my employee, and her boyfriend is sitting right next to her.

Scrap that plan.

Race is putting the Uno cards away, and we start getting ready to leave.

On our way out, Addison offers an unexpected invitation. "Ana, Race, would you like to join us at the Central Park race tomorrow morning? It's the New York Road Runner Run-As-One. They have a half-mile run for the kids and a 5K for the adults. I plan to run both; Dad says I can."

Ana spins around to face Race. "Do we have any plans tomorrow? We don't have to run, we can just cheer them on."

“Other than our weekly trip to the farmers’ market before meeting up with the girls, we have no plans.” Race snickers. “I’m in if you’re in. As for running, if J-Lo isn’t in front of me, I can’t guarantee I’ll be motivated, but I can give it a try.”

Ana grins, looking at Addison with delight. “We’re in! It sounds like fun, and I love supporting a great cause!”

“Color us there, lovebug!” Race chuckles.

Dammit, Addison!

I don’t know if I can spend any more time near Ana without the overwhelming desire to sweep her into my arms and claim her. But she has a boyfriend and pursuing her is out of the question. As hard as it is to keep her image out of my head when I fist my cock in the shower, I need to keep my distance. And maybe treat myself to a cold rinse or two.

“Great. We’ll see you tomorrow,” I say stiffly. “Addison, we need to get going so we’ll be fresh for the race, especially if you want to run both,” I urge, gently guiding her toward the door.

“See y’all tomorrow!” Ana and Race offer warm smiles as we exit their apartment.

A wave of simmering jealousy churns through me as I reluctantly leave Ana behind with Race.

“Dad, I really like Ana,” Addison announces once we settle into our town car and start moving in the heavy evening Manhattan traffic.

Taking her hand in mine, I confess, “I like them, too. Ana’s an incredible assistant. I would be lost without her.”

“She’s a great listener. And she gave me advice on a problem I’ve been having.” Addison’s voice grows softer with each word. I know what her problem is, and I brace myself for the conversation as we quietly observe the bustling city around us.

As our driver turns onto our street, I break the silence, “I’m glad you feel comfortable enough to talk to Ana. I’m always here if you need to discuss anything.”

“Anything except my mother.” Addison’s voice wavers between strength and fear.

Taking a moment to gather my thoughts as the car comes to a stop, I reach for a tissue box in the console between our seats and hand it to her.

“Your mother was beautiful, just like you. In fact, you resemble her in many ways.” I wrap my arm around her shoulders and draw her close. “You have similar mannerisms and reactions. It’s sometimes uncanny, considering you never met her.” I pause. “But she was loving and ambitious. She wanted the best for herself and for everyone she loved, just like you. In her mind, there was an abundance of everything for everyone: time, love, flowers, friends, choices.”

In that moment, I realize I have perfectly described Ana as well. I suppose I have a type.

“Can we spend more time with Ana?” Addison turns to me, her eyes brimming with tears.

“I know you want the best for me, pumpkin, and I’m happy that you like Ana,” I continue. “I do, too. But if you’re expecting me to date her.... It’s complicated.”

Seeing tears escape my daughter’s eyes, I hold her tightly as an idea comes to mind. “Your mother made video recordings while she was pregnant with you. How about we make tea, and I’ll set up the DVD in my room. Change into your pajamas, and we’ll watch a few minutes before bedtime. I’ll tell you everything I remember about that time.”

“Yay! Let’s do it!” Addison cheers, hugging me back as we step out of the town car.

The rest of the evening is a much-needed bonding experience between us. I finally open up about my love for Addison’s mother while she learns more about the woman who brought her into this world.

CHAPTER 17



ANA

THE FORECAST CALLED FOR CLOUDY WEATHER, PROMPTING ME to wear a hoodie over a sports bra. But as the sun comes out and shines hot enough to scramble eggs on concrete, I begin shedding unnecessary clothing and guzzling water. Race will be behind me shortly since he had to decide on what shoes to wear.

I start stretching. From the moment my best friend arrives, I can't help but feel self-conscious as Brando barely keeps his eyes off him. If I didn't know better, I would think that Brando is interested in Race. But that wouldn't explain why he kissed me after the protest.

What is your deal, Mr. Sanders? Are you... bisexual? Bi-curious?

And why am I even thinking about him? I decided wisely that a relationship with my boss wasn't a good idea, and I will stick to that decision.

“Earth to Ana!” Race snaps his fingers twice near my face. The cracking sound makes my eyes pop wide open.

“What’s going on in that coconut, Mama?” Race inquires as he places my discarded clothing into my gym bag. Sidestepping my random thought about Brando’s sexuality, I redirect my bestie’s attention.

“Don’t look, but is Brando watching you?” I nonchalantly ask Race, my back turned toward my boss, pointing my ass toward his line of vision.

Surreptitiously, Race looks in Brando's direction. His mouth curls into a mischievous grin as he replies, "Hmm, he's definitely looking this way, but I think he's checking out your ass more than anything."

"Well, he was watching you last night," I point out. "But I thought we all had a blast playing Uno together. Between him and Addison, we can't win to save our lives!"

"One, we have to do a sleepover with Addy. Two, I'm gonna whoop her ass the next time we play Uno!" Race declares as he loops his arm through mine, leading me toward the runner's table to sign up for the adults' run and get our assigned numbers. I look behind me to see Brando, Addison, and Charlotte heading in our direction. My heart thumps wildly as I come closer to Brando, and I calm my breathing once we simultaneously arrive at the table. After we all have our numbers, we wait by the starting line.

It's easy to tell that both Brando and Addison are used to running in these types of events, but this is my first race. Skipping breakfast may have been a mistake because I could have used the energy boost, but I didn't want to feel too heavy, and I'm sure to work up an appetite during the 5K.

As she said she would, Addison has signed up for both runs. She is very much like her father. Strong-willed, athletic, and determined. I am reminded of my conversation with Addison the night before. A part of me wishes that her mother could be here to share this moment with her.

"Good luck, pumpkin." Brando smiles, looking like the proud father that he is.

"We can watch the race over here," he suggests, leading us to a side path.

Charlotte and Race stand ahead of Brando and me while the kids shuffle past us. As Addison quickly takes and holds the lead, we all cheer for her success. When I glance over at Brando occasionally, I can't help noticing the look of a proud father on his face when he isn't glaring at Race or sneaking peeks at me.

I see you seeing me, Boss Man. But what's up with you and Race?

“Go, Addy, go!” Brando nearly screams, pumping his fist into the air.

“Breathe, honeybun, breathe,” Race yells, causing Brando to look at me in confusion.

As Addison and the other runners approach the finish line, Brando’s voice soars above everyone else’s when his daughter wins the race. Greeting Addison with a fresh bottle of water and a towel, Brando hugs her.

“Congratulations to all the runners of the kid’s run!” the MC announces from the stage. “The 5K will begin on the west path in ten minutes!”

“Way to go, baby! I’m so proud of you!” Brando gushes, hugging his daughter and kissing her cheek. “Are you okay? Do you need more water? Are you still doing the adult run with us? Do your feet hurt?”

“Dad, I’m fine!” Addison stops him.

“Congratulations, honey bunny!” Race says and high-fives Addison, followed by a side hug. “You took off like a rocket!”

“I am so impressed, Addison!” I add, also hugging the young girl. “Those other kids never had a chance.” I pause. “But are you ready to challenge the adults?”

“The question is, are the adults ready for me?” Addison grins.

There is nothing that matches the confidence instilled into the Upper East Side private school kids. I nod encouragingly.

Laughing and congratulating our winner, our little group prepares for the next run by hydrating and warming up our legs. Minutes later, we head for the starting line.

“Runners, on your mark. Ready, set, GO!”

The starter pistol fires, adding to the adrenaline coursing through me. My legs take off before the rest of my body, trying to keep up with Brando and Addison. Feeling like I am outside my body, I have to kick myself back to reality and start

running. Within seconds, I dart up to my group. Thankfully, Race and Charlotte look like they are walk-running, which makes it easy for me to keep pace. I urge my slower friends, “You can do it! Just one step at a time! A little faster till it’s margarita time!”

“Now you’re speaking my language!” Race enthuses, with Charlotte joining his tempo. “Come on, Mama Char, let’s do this!”

It’s hard for me to keep up, but I’m enjoying the strength of my body and the adrenaline that courses through it. I make a mental note to start running regularly.

Much like my relationship with Brando, before long, we are no longer at the start but still far from the end.

One thing I need to figure out is the growing tense energy between Brando and Race. I’ll be damned if I end my lifelong friendship over some dude, no matter how dreamy he is.

CHAPTER 18



BRANDO

CHARLOTTE AND RACE START WALKING AFTER THE FIRST MILE, which allows Addison, Ana, and me to pick up our pace. Darting into open spaces between the runners ahead of me, we quickly pass the two-and-a-half-mile mark. I look back to see that Addison has begun to fall back. Slowing down to allow her to catch up, my attention diverts to Ana as she has already appeared next to her. I let them gain ground so that the three of us are running in tandem. By the tail end of the race, runners are lagging farther behind as we maintain a steady speed.

“Dad, look! We’re almost there!” Addison cheers, accelerating.

As we cross the finish line, Ana and I high-five each other. I wish I could drag her into my arms instead.

Eventually, Charlotte and Race join us, jogging over to congratulate us.

“We walked the rest of the way.” Race chuckles as he gushes over Addison. “I am so proud of you, honey bunny! I can’t believe you did both races!”

“I knew I could do it. My dad is the best trainer in the world!” Addison exclaims.

Looking over at Ana, she is smiling as she accepts a bottle of water from Charlotte.

I take the opportunity to invite them to dinner at my place to celebrate.

“Thank you, but I have another engagement,” Race states, winking at Ana. “In fact, I need to get going. I’ll see you back at home, Ana Banana.” Kissing Ana on the cheek, Race exchanges his goodbyes before departing to call for an Uber.

“Raincheck, Boss Man. The husband and I also have plans,” Charlotte explains before she excuses herself. “No kiddos in the house for a full week starts tonight! And Race, honey, I’m sure you’re on my way, so save your Uber money.”

“Aww! Thank you, Mama Char!” Race hugs Charlotte with a shake and a shimmy.

With a final goodbye, Race and Charlotte walk toward the park exit on 72nd Street.

I look at Ana, expecting her to back out as well.

But instead, she inquires with a bright smile, “What time should I be there?” She picks up her gym bag and looks up at me as if this were a normal thing we do all the time.

“Yay!” Addison jumps with excitement before hugging Ana. “Let’s celebrate!”

I’m confused and thrilled at the same time. She’s going to have dinner with us without her boyfriend? As we walk uptown toward the park exit on 79th Street, I wonder what sort of a relationship these two have.

“Pumpkin, calm down and get ready to go home. The car will be here in five minutes.”

Turning my attention back to Ana, I inquire, “See you at seven?”

“Seven sounds great.”

ADDISON WANTS spaghetti and vegan meatballs for dinner, one of her favorites. Not knowing what Ana likes, I hope that we have made a wise choice. Addison wants to impress our guest with my cooking. If I didn’t know better, I would think that my daughter is playing matchmaker.

Arriving with a bottle of wine and sparkling juice for Addison, Ana is wearing an attractive sundress with sandals. She is

pretty, young, vibrant and as tempting as a ripe peach on a hot summer day. It will be hard for me to keep my hands off her.

“You’re just in time. Do you like vegan meatballs in your pasta?”

“I love them.” Ana grins as she sits at the dining room table.

As Addison sets the table, Ana asks if my daughter is interested in any boys at her school.

“What about that boy in your science class?”

Giggling, Addison replies, “We don’t have chemistry.”

Guffawing, I say, “Oh wow! That is a great joke, ladies!”

Looking at me seriously, Addison asks, “What joke? It didn’t work out, so I’m single now.”

Single? It didn’t work out? Is my daughter dating before I am?

“Is Race dating anyone?” Addison asks, stopping me in my tracks.

Scolding my daughter, I say, “Addison, don’t be rude. What did I tell you about assumptions?”

“Dad, you figured out by now that Race is gay, right?” Addison states nonchalantly. “I found out the other night when we were at their place.”

I’m too stunned to speak. I look over at Ana, who squirms in her seat slightly. But as I continue staring at her, she lifts her eyes and holds my gaze, the air between us charged with electricity.

If Race is not her boyfriend...

For the rest of the evening, I continue watching Ana as she enjoys her food and jokes with Addison, talking about a recent trip to Venice and Cinque Terre.

She must feel my hungry eyes on her, as she lifts hers often to return my gaze, an unspoken understanding between us.

I love Addison to pieces, but tonight, I can’t wait for her to go to bed.

After dinner, I have prepared a movie for us to watch together, but luckily, Addison is fading fast. At the end of a full day of physical activity, I am not surprised that she's exhausted.

As I carry Addison's sleeping body, Ana follows me and opens the door to her bedroom.

I tuck Addison in and close the door.

Finally, we are alone.

I turn to Ana, standing dangerously close. She doesn't step back. And suddenly, I don't care that she is my employee.

If I have to, I'll find another assistant.

"So, Race is not your boyfriend, then?"

"No. We are roommates." Her skin is flushed, and her nipples pebble under my heavy gaze.

"Do you want this?" I demand. Her body is vibrating, but I want to be sure.

She looks at me longingly and nods her head.

It's impossible to stop myself from touching her stiffened nipples, and I brush my fingers across the hard peaks, causing her to shudder.

She's not wearing a bra.

Her breath is labored, ragged.

"So, if he is not your boyfriend, what's been stopping you?" I ask, pulling her lithe body into mine, darkness and determination rising in me. Her body is soft, and it's as if there were no bones holding her upright anymore.

I need to burrow into her and claim what's mine.

"You're my boss," she offers weakly.

"Bullshit rules," I spit, and trace my mouth along her neck.

She looks up at me, her eyes turning to fire.

"Ask me," I demand, and she glances up in confusion. "Ask me to kiss you."

Her breath is shallow and accelerating.

“Kiss me, Brando,” she pleads.

“Good girl.”

I crush my mouth to hers. She responds immediately, parting her lips and letting me explore her with my tongue.

I’m now free to act on all the impulses I have been holding back.

“Let’s move this to my bedroom,” I grind out. Not waiting for Ana to answer, I lead her to my room.

I smile against her cleavage as I take in her scent, earthy and flowery. “I can’t wait to see what’s underneath that silky dress.”

“I want you so badly,” she whispers into my ear, her breath hot and shaky. She places her hand on my shaft, feeling my hardness.

I have to fuck her.

“How bad?” I rasp as I lift her dress and pull it over her head, revealing her full breasts and taut body, only a flimsy pink panty separating me from what I’ve wanted for so long.

“I will ruin you for every other man,” I warn as I trail my lips down her neck.

She shivers in my arms, giving me the green light to ravage her the way I want to.

CHAPTER 19



ANA

THE ROOM IS ENVELOPED IN DARKNESS, AND MY BREATH hitches in my throat. My heart races, my head resting against Brando's chest. Our bodies rise and fall in tandem. His embrace is warm, but I am shivering.

"Come here," he orders. Taking my hand, he leads me to his king-sized bed, its white sheets crisp and inviting. My longing is intense, and my knees hardly carry me.

His heavy breath dances across my hairline as he smiles down at me, sending a pulse of want rushing through me. He leans in and captures my lips. Our tongues dance together, feverishly tasting one another until we're forced to come up for air.

A soft moan escapes from my lips when Brando reluctantly pulls away, only to be rewarded by a wolfish smile. He leans forward and nibbles on my earlobe lightly before trailing a line of kisses down to my collarbone. I arch into his touch. My chest rises and falls faster and faster with each brush of his lips against my skin. Shivers skitter along my spine as his muscular arms wrap around my back and trace every curve of my shoulders.

I entangle my fingers in his hair and relish the feeling of his silky waves tickling my skin.

"You are so soft," he rasps, pressing more kisses along my shoulders. My hands trace the contours of his powerfully built chest. Another involuntary sigh escapes me, pouring more fuel on the fire between us.

“Tell me what you want,” he demands in a husky, seductive growl that makes the space between my legs erupt. I hesitate for the smallest of seconds.

“I want your cock inside me.” The words slip past my lips without my permission, and his eyes gleam in the soft flicker of city lights. “I want to feel you inside me.”

My heart pounds against my rib cage, and I twine my arms around his neck that much tighter.

“Fuck me.”

“You want it bad, don’t you?” he snarls, his eyes meeting mine and burning with desire and a fiery passion, unlike anything I’ve ever seen.

“I want you to fuck me hard,” I whisper, surrendering to his embrace.

“I can’t wait to hear you screaming out my name as you come around my cock,” he says, and his hand expertly caresses my exposed breasts. “Beautiful,” he adds as he leans down and licks my taut nipples before sliding his hand down to the small of my back and pulling me in.

Heat radiates between us, and my pulse roars in my ears as I fight to even out my breathing long enough to fully bask in the splendor of this moment.

His breath is hot against my neck. He pulls my panties down and licks the lips of my pussy.

“Delicious,” he says. “But dessert is for later. First, I want to fuck you.”

He slides up my body, and his fingers tease my opening. I’m lost in the sensation coursing through me but manage an eager nod as my hips arch against his hand.

“Good girl,” he whispers darkly. His fingers continue to stroke and tease me, and my head spins.

My nails dig into his shoulders as the intensity of the moment threatens to overwhelm me. My fingers entangle themselves in his thick black hair as I press my lips gently to his collarbone. He hums in response, and the sound vibrates against my skin,

sending yet another intense pulse of electricity cursing through me.

“I wanted to do this from the first moment I laid eyes on you,” I murmur as the silken strands wrap around my fingers.

His hazel eyes are dark with desire, demanding. He pulls me into his arms, and our lips meet once more. The crisp sheets rustle beneath us as he slides down my body.

The warmth of Brando’s touch is electric. “You’re mine now,” he says, and his lips gently brush against my toes, whisking the air from my lungs. Slowly, he trails kisses up my legs, lingering on the soft skin behind my knees. My pulse pounds in my ears, and my chest heaves with every synchronized breath.

“I will give you anything,” he says, his gaze dancing over me. His smile is wickedly sweet as his mouth finds the curve of my hips, making me squirm. Each kiss feels like a brand, claiming me as his own.

“Will you give me everything?”

“Y-yes. I will give you everything.”

“Good girl.”

He moves up my body, lingering at my breasts, teasing my nipples and making them ache for more.

“Patience, Ana.” He smirks as he trails kisses up my neck, leaving a path of tingling heat in their wake. My body arches into his, and it’s all I can do to keep my impulses in check.

He kneels between my legs, playfully sliding his cock against my slick entrance. “Are you on birth control?” he asks, waiting.

“I... I’m on the pill,” I answer quickly, pushing my hips upward, needing to feel him better.

“Perfect.” He finally pushes his tip inside me and setting off fireworks in my aching core.

“You like my cock in your pussy?” he teases me as I arch my back even more, trying to envelop him.

“More, Brando, please, I need to feel you.” I almost cry, unable to hold it any longer.

He starts to thrust slowly, carefully stretching me at first, then picking up the pace.

“You’re perfect for me. Tight and wet,” he growls as he begins to thrust faster. It’s all I need to come undone, digging my nails into his large back.

“Don’t you dare come before I tell you to,” he warns darkly, slowing his rhythm as I begin tightening around him.

Our bodies are joined together in perfect harmony. The room fades away as we lose ourselves in each other, and our desire builds to a fever pitch. Our fingers intertwine as we climb higher and higher. Our breaths come in ragged gasps.

“Come for me baby,” he orders finally, and I reach my peak, feeling him spill himself into my core.

Our bodies quiver. For a moment, time stands still.

“That was... hot, darling,” he possessively slaps my ass as I collapse on his chest, his fingers gently tracing delicate patterns on my back.

“Beyond words,” I agree.

Our eyes meet, and in that moment, everything else fades away, leaving only the two of us, wrapped in each other’s arms.

THE MORNING LIGHT bathes Brando’s naked body in a warm glow. I carefully disentangle myself from his arms, trying not to disturb his peace. The frown lines that normally contort every inch of his handsome face are nearly non-existent now, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look so relaxed.

My bare feet pad across the plush carpet as I gather my clothes and slip them on. The air is still charged with the remnants of our passion.

My gaze lingers on Brando’s perfect, softly snoring form as I inch the bedroom door open.

“Good morning, Ana!” My breath hitches in my throat, and my cheeks flame as I catch a glimpse of Addison’s lithe form lingering in the doorway.

Shit.

How much did she hear?

How much does she understand?

She steps closer, and I flinch slightly at the flicker of surprise dancing in her bright blue eyes.

“Uh, hi, Addison,” I stammer. My fingers wander to the hem of my shirt, and I twist it until it feels like I might lose circulation. “I, um, your dad and I were working late last night, and...” I trail off as my gaze whips between Addison’s innocent face and the bedroom door.

And what?

“Right.” She smiles at me reassuringly. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. This is the first time my dad has had a girlfriend stay overnight.”

“I... I’m not his g-girl...” I stammer, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“Oh, that’s a bummer.” She shrugs, disappointed.

I exhale.

“Even though you’re not his girlfriend, do you want to have breakfast with us?” She winks at me, signaling that she understands I’m fibbing.

Crisis averted. She’s not upset.

I blink, then do a double-take “Are you sure?” I stop, then shake my head.

Don’t be ridiculous, Ana!

“I mean, no. I couldn’t. I don’t want to impose.”

“You won’t be,” Addison assures me, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the kitchen. “Dad’s always so busy; it’s great to see him spending time with someone he likes.”

Nibbling on my lower lip, I'm left no choice but to allow myself to be led into the kitchen. As we sit down at the table, the scent of freshly brewed coffee fills the air, and I marvel at how easily Brando's daughter flits around the kitchen.

When Addison sees me eyeing the coffeemaker like it was made of twenty-four-karat gold, she pours me a cup.

"Do you need any help?" I turn to face her once I'm holding the steaming mug in my palms.

I take a sip, sighing in relief.

This is good coffee. Hawaiian Kona, I could swear.

"Sure!" She smiles, gesturing to the open drawer of knives and the pile of fruit on the counter. "Can you cut those up? I washed them already."

I nod, allowing the familiar rhythm of the knife against the cutting board to calm my nerves. Addison chats about her plans for the day, and I genuinely enjoy our conversation.

Soon after, footsteps shuffle across the carpet. Addison and I look up, and my heart skips a beat as Brando enters the kitchen. His hair is tousled from sleep, an air of content radiating from him.

At least, until he sees me.

His eyes bulge, and his mouth drops open slightly as he tries to disguise his surprised gasp with a cough.

"Um... good morning." His brows knit together.

I shrug and mouth, *Sorry*. He tilts his head but doesn't wait for an explanation before shifting his focus to his daughter. "What's all this?"

"Ana's having breakfast with us!" Addison announces as she moves to set the table.

"Is that so?" A hint of a smile lingers on his lips, though its slightly dampened by the conflict dancing in his eyes as he slides into his chair.

I nod weakly, ducking my head. We're still walking on uncertain ground, but for now, he's letting me stay. And I

know better than to take that for granted.

As we eat together, I catch Brando's eye across the table. His gaze holds mine for a moment before he gives me a small, tender smile.

"Addison, I need to head out now. I have a yoga class at eleven," I announce, rising from the table and taking my plate to the sink. "Thank you for inviting me to breakfast."

"Anytime!" She beams and waves her fork at me. "I hope we can do this again soon."

"Me too," I admit.

Warmth spreads through me when I catch Brando's eyes lighting up in return.

THE DOOR to my apartment swings open, and Race immediately catches sight of the extra skip in my step. Before I can so much as change my clothes, he beckons me over to the couch, tempting me with yet another freshly brewed cup of coffee and demanding I "spill all the tea."

"There's nothing to spill," I say, waving away his curiosity.

"Girl." He gives me a long hard look, and I can't help ducking my head. "No one walks in floating on cloud nine like you just did and *doesn't* have a story." He takes another long sip of his coffee and smirks at me over the rim until my cheeks burn.

"Alright, fine," I mutter. "I may have, kinda accidentally, spent the night at Brando's place."

A lilt creeps into my voice, and Race beams like a little kid on Christmas.

"I knew it!" he exclaims, shifting positions on the couch so his legs are tucked under him as he shakes my arm. "Tell me everything."

I laugh. "Okay, I'll tell you what I can, but I don't want to give you all the details. Some things need to be kept private."

"Fair enough." He chuckles, settling down on the couch beside me. "But you have to admit, it's pretty crazy—you and the boss, huh?"

“He’s not just the boss, Race. He’s... he’s a good guy. But I admit, I’m a little scared about what this could mean.”

I bite my lip and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

Race nods. “Hey,” he places a reassuring hand on my shoulder, “whatever happens, we’ll figure it out together, okay?”

I grin, tipping my cup toward my lips again. “Thanks, Race. That means a lot.”

He winks, his smile widening. “And for the record, I had a great night, too.”

CHAPTER 20



BRANDO

AFTER THE DOOR BEHIND ANA CLOSES, I'M MET WITH Addison's inquisitive gaze.

"So... You and Ana...?" she starts, grinning at me sheepishly.

"Yes," I admit cautiously, gauging her reaction. She seems at ease and relaxed. "I like her a lot."

Addison begins clearing away the breakfast plates and pours me another cup of coffee.

I attempt an explanation a twelve-year-old can comprehend, brushing over the details that are still burned into my mind. "After I found out she is not with Race, I decided to ask her to be more than a friend to me."

"Did it work?" she asks innocently.

Good lord, how do I explain this to a twelve-year-old?

"Sort of. We'll see."

"Is she your girlfriend now?"

"Not yet, pumpkin. She has to agree to it first. But I wanted to be honest with you about my feelings for her."

"I understand." Addison puts the plates in the sink and gives me a warm hug. "It's about time you got yourself a girlfriend," she concludes happily. "And I like having her around, too."

AS ANA HANDS me my coffee on Monday morning, its scent tickles my nostrils, though I'm much more entranced by the way her blonde hair catches the morning sunrays.

She paces the room in confident strides, but no matter where she stops, she's always surrounded by a perfect halo of light. Every time our eyes meet, electricity crackles in the air.

I've become a damn cliché—the billionaire CEO sleeping with his assistant. And yet, no matter how sappy and inappropriate it may be, I see very few reasons to stop.

“Thank you, Ana.” I clear my throat, wondering whether my words came out even and professional, or with an edge that betrays the coil of desire burning in my core.

All I can think about is how soft her skin felt against mine as her pussy was wrapped around me.

“You got it.” The smile dancing on her lips is sincere, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes.

“Listen, about Saturday night...” I start.

“Please—” Ana holds up a hand inches away from my lips. My cock immediately stiffens at the memory of her hands trailing down my back. “Let's not discuss that here.”

I clamp my mouth shut as her gaze darts to the door, which stands slightly ajar.

“We both know it was a mistake.”

I clear my throat. “How so”

Ana chews her lip and swallows hard before meeting my gaze. “I wish it didn't have to be like this,” she whispers. “But I can't afford to be the girl who bangs her boss.”

She's pulling back.

My hand unconsciously wanders up to my neck and rubs the sensitive skin. I hate it, but I can't deny the truth.

If word gets out, it could ruin her reputation. Not to mention jeopardize the progress I've made with securing enough shares to dismantle the board.

My stomach ties itself in knots. I don't want to mess this up, but every time she's near, all I can think about is how much I want her.

She needs time.

“Let’s just... try to be professional, okay?” Ana takes a deep breath and moves a few steps backward.

Immediately, I miss her proximity.

“For now,” I reply, forcing myself to stop staring at her. “So, what’s next on the agenda?”

She’s afraid. I will give her the time she needs.

“A meeting with the design team in thirty minutes.” Her voice is clipped and stern as she glances at her folder, slipping back effortlessly into her assistant role. “And we need to finalize the budget proposal for the foundation.”

“Right.” I nod, forcing my mind to stay on the list of tasks ahead as I mentally check them off one by one. As much as I want to forget about last night, there is not a single part of me that regrets it.

We can take it slow, if that’s what she needs.

“Let’s get started then.”

I follow her back to my desk, and it’s a conscious effort not to let my gaze linger too long on the way her hips sway.

THE TENSION between us hangs heavy in the air as we stand outside the meeting room, waiting to present our idea for a non-profit organization that will support under privileged children in the community.

I wish I could say it was just nerves.

Even though there’s nearly a foot of space between Ana and me, her presence pulls me inward like a magnet. Every impulse in my body is aching to claim her and never let go.

“Ready?” I glance at her and hold back a gasp. She looks beautiful. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a tight bun and her blue eyes are focused and determined.

“Ready,” she replies, meeting my gaze with a sharp nod. “Let’s do this.”

I push open the door, and we step inside, our polished shoes clicking on the marble floor.

Two middle-aged men in crisp suits sit across a long, gleaming conference table. Their faces are neutral but expectant. I swallow hard, then clear my throat and roll my shoulders back as I straighten my tie. I approach one of the men, who promptly stands up as I hold out my hand.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I’m Brando Sanders, CEO of Sanders International, and this is my assistant, Ana Layne.”

“Nice to meet you both.” He clasps my hand in a firm grip.

“I’m Lance, and this is my associate, Ethan.” He nods to the other man, whom I give a tight smile.

Ana’s fingers tremble as she reaches out to greet them, but she manages to keep her composure as we all slide into chairs around the table.

“Thank you for having us today.” I launch into my pitch. “I’m here to present an idea that would benefit not only your company but most importantly, the children we are trying to help.”

The men look interested.

“As a large technology company, we know that bridging the digital divide for underprivileged children will be a cause that will resonate with your mission.”

As I outline our plan for our non-profit, and the sponsorship we are asking them for, Ana chimes in with metrics and case studies. Despite the recent awkwardness between us, we work seamlessly together—her creativity and passion enhance my analytical and strategic mind. I continue talking about the benefits of the project while Ana slides me the papers I need to remind me of the details.

“Your proposal is intriguing,” Ethan remarks. “It would give us exposure to an underserved demographic and build a market share over the long term.” He looks down at the paperwork we’ve handed over, and his partner nods.

“It has potential.”

As we wrap up the meeting and shake hands again, I keep the jubilant smile off my face.

“Great job today,” I tell Ana when the other men are out of earshot. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

As the meeting room empties, Ana and I are left alone. I watch as she tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear, the hint of a smile still gracing her lips.

Unable to resist her, I pull her aside, feeling the warmth of her arm under my touch.

“I need to talk to you,” I say in a low voice.

“Of course.” Her blue eyes meet mine, filled with curiosity that makes my heart flutter. “What’s going on?”

Shifting on the balls of my feet, I take a deep breath in and stuff my hands in my pockets.

“My father called earlier today. He refuses to abolish the board.”

Her eyes widen. “That’s not unexpected.”

“Right.” I let out a sigh and run a hand down my face. “He won’t agree to anything until we meet face-to-face. But he won’t come to New York.”

She places a hand on my arm, and a jolt of electricity zips through my veins. I run a hand through my hair.

“I’m coming up with another plan,” I tell her. “Then I’ll finally be able to take the company in the direction I want.”

Ana is quiet, and I can practically see the gears turning in her head. She takes a deep breath and turns back to me, giving my hand a gentle squeeze.

“Let’s get back to work,” I say softly, barely curbing the impulse to brush the strand of blonde hair out of her face.

“Of course.” She nods, turning and sauntering off in the other direction. As she walks away, I follow her with my gaze until her silhouette is no longer visible.

That afternoon, even as I bury myself in paperwork and emails, the hours drag on like a slow, torturous dance. My mind keeps drifting to Ana, her teasing smile, and the sparkle in her eyes. I can't focus on anything else, and it's driving me mad.

At last, I snap.

This silliness stops now.

"Ana, come into my office for a moment," I demand through the intercom.

"Of course," she replies. Her sweet, melodic voice sends electricity down my spine.

My pulse quickens as her footsteps approach. The door swings open, revealing her slim figure. She steps inside, and I stride over to shut the door behind her.

Anything to keep me from ravishing her.

Only I don't want to stop myself.

"Is everything okay?" Curiosity is etched across her beautiful features, and I do my best to reassure her with an easy smile.

"Everything's fine," I say softly. "But are we ever going to talk about Saturday night?"

Her eyes widen.

"Oh."

"Two days is all I'm willing to give you to freak out." I pause, and she gasps audibly. "The point of being the boss is that I make all the rules," I continue in a low, determined voice, stepping even closer.

The words hang in the air between us.

She hesitates. Her hungry gaze flitters back and forth between my eyes and the button I've accidentally left undone at the top of my dress shirt.

"Brando, let's think a—"

Before she can finish the sentence, I cup her chin in the palm of my hand and draw her toward me. A moan of pleasure

escapes her, and I smile as our lips crash together. The heat of her body pressed against mine is intoxicating. Her perfume permeates the air and cocoons us in a bubble of our own.

I lean behind her and lock the door.

Her body responds by softening helplessly, and in one swift motion, I lift her up and carry her to my desk, setting her on it. The papers that had been piling up scatter in a chaotic whirlwind, but I can't bring myself to care.

Ana gasps, her fingers digging into my shoulders as I explore the delicate curve of her neck with my lips.

"I need you to ride my cock again," I growl, my hands slipping beneath her blouse and pinching her taut nipples. Our bodies move together in a feverish dance, our breaths come in ragged gasps. With each touch and kiss, I fall deeper and deeper under her spell. My hands trail down her body, tracing the curve of her hips. Ana moans, and her body pulses against mine as I deepen the kiss.

"We should stop," she whispers, pulling back slightly. "Someone could hear us."

But the moment the words leave her lips, her fingers cling to the lapels of my shirt.

Why is my shirt still on?

"Let them hear us," I say, and in one fell swoop, I rip my shirt open. "They should all know that you are mine."

The desperation in her eyes combined with the unconscious shaking of her body tells me there is no turning back. I lean in for another hungry kiss, and this time, I slowly trace every contour of her perfect body until I reach her hip line, then her core.

Her scent is delicious.

Earthy.

"Brando," she moans, her hands gripping my hair. I feel her desire building as her body trembles.

"I want to hear you scream my name again."

“Please,” she begs.

She responds to my touch and is eager for more. For a moment, it’s as if we are the only two people that exist in this world. Her body is pliant. My hands move deeper and deeper, exploring her sensitive spots. Her flesh is on fire. My hands move to her skirt, and I hike it up around her waist.

“Please...” she repeats, panting.

I grasp her thighs, spreading her legs. “Please what?” I murmur, my tongue flicking out as I push her panties aside and lick her pussy lips.

“I want you... I want you inside me. Now,” she groans, her nails digging into my back and pulling me up.

My fingers hold her soaked panties aside as I play with her swollen sex, teasing her slick folds apart.

I want to hear her beg more.

Her hands grip my hair and pull. But I don’t stop. Her moans are growing louder and louder by the second, and I can’t wait much longer. I want to feel the heat of her tight pussy.

And I want it now.

I pull away just enough to press my lips against hers, a desperate groan escaping her.

I slip my fingers inside her, and she cries out.

“Please, fuck me,” she moans.

“That’s a good girl,” I whisper, my lips against her ear.

I move my fingers in and out, up and down her opening. The sound of her ragged breath, the smell of her arousal, the feel of her body against mine, it all drives me wild.

My cock is solid granite.

I pull my fingers out of her soaking pussy and push them into her mouth. She sucks my fingers eagerly, and I can’t wait to feel her mouth sucking on my cock.

But not yet.

First, I want to claim what’s mine.

With trembling hands, she helps me remove her blouse and bra, her breasts spilling out. They are white and round, and I take a nipple in my mouth, swirling my tongue around it, while she pulls my head closer.

“I want to see your tits bouncing in my face while I thrust into you,” I say and slide off my pants and boxers, my cock springing free, only her silky, soaked panties separating us. I pull her close to me, and her legs obediently wrap around my waist. I rip her panties, finally gaining full access, and I press my tip against her wet opening, pushing in only slightly.

“Take the tip first,” I say, playing with her pulsating core. “You know what’s coming.”

“Oh, God. Yes. More.”

She looks down, watching in anticipation as my dick glides up and down her opening, slowly entering her.

Watching her surrender to me is driving me wild. She would let me do anything I wanted to her right now, and the thought is intoxicating.

I thrust my hips forward, sliding inside her fully, and she cries out, burying her face in my shoulder.

Her hips move against mine, grinding against me as I start to fuck her hard. I grip her ass with both hands as I thrust into her faster and faster. Her body is pressed against mine, her breasts bouncing just as I wanted them to, her arms around my neck. She kisses me, her tongue slipping into my mouth, her moans mixing with mine.

“Come for me, baby,” I order and feel her convulsing around my dick, making me spill into her.

I take my time and pull out slowly, not wanting this moment to end.

“I’m going to clean you up,” I whisper in her ear, as I release her hips and bend down.

I run my tongue along her slit, her juices mixing with mine. I press my mouth against her clit, and she cries out again, her nails digging into my shoulders. I suck her clit into my mouth,

holding it between my teeth as I lick her, my hands cupping her ass, my thumbs rubbing against her opening. Her hands are on my head, pulling me into her, guiding me where she wants me.

“Fuck!” she moans. “Fuck, yes! Yes, please!”

I slide my hands up her body and cup her round breasts, my thumbs rubbing against her nipples. She rocks her hips against me, my name echoing through the empty office.

CHAPTER 21



ANA

I WALK INTO THE OFFICE THE NEXT DAY, FLOATING.

“Hey, Charlotte.” I walk to my desk and slide into my chair, turning to her.

“You look happy,” she says, grinning widely. “I’ve brought you a latte.”

“Thanks,” I reply. “I love surprises.”

“Spill it, girl,” Charlotte demands.

Shit.

She must have noticed the constant smile dancing on my lips. She leans forward, and her eyes light up.

“How are things going with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Brooding?”

“Shut up! It’s not like that.”

But even as I say it, my cheeks flush. “He’s my boss, remember?”

“Uh-huh.” She smirks, and I bark out an uneasy laugh.

“I’m serious.”

“And yet, you always seem to be hanging around his office more than necessary.”

“You know we’re working together on the nonprofit.”

I try to turn the conversation in a different direction, but Charlotte is like a bloodhound.

“You know what they say about all work and no play,” she teases, before taking a sip of her latte.

“Fine, whatever.” I sigh and roll my eyes. We are interrupted by my phone ringing.

I hear Brando’s firm voice. “Ana, please come to my office.”

Does he have another surprise for me this morning?

My core tingles in anticipation as I stand up. Charlotte follows me with a smirk, and I turn to her.

“Cut it out!” I exclaim as I open the door to Brando’s office. Laughter bubbles past my lips, despite myself. She really is incorrigible.

As I step in, Brando is seated at his imposing desk, and I blush as I remember all the things he did to me on it yesterday.

“Close the door,” he orders, as he stands up and approaches me.

His eyes lock onto mine, filled with excitement.

“I did it,” he says gleefully.

“Did what?”

“With the final shareholder selling me their shares, I now own 60 percent of Sanders International. I’m in full control as of last night.”

For a moment, I’m speechless.

This is huge, not just for Brando, but for the future of the firm.

“How did you manage to do this?” I ask, stunned.

“I quietly lobbied them one by one and kept buying the shares.” He pauses. “I will announce it to the rest of the company soon, but first things first. I want to dissolve the board immediately.”

“Oh my God! Now you can finally steer the company where you want it,” I exclaim.

“Exactly,” he says triumphantly.

He pulls me close and presses his lips against mine, our breaths mingling, his hazel eyes filled with desire.

“This is a whole new chapter for Sanders International.” He combs a stray lock of hair behind my ear, and I shiver beneath his touch.

“Of course, it is,” I say softly, my cheeks flushed.

“Let’s go talk to the board,” he says and pulls me by the hand.

“Right now?” I stumble behind him, my heart thumping in my chest.

“They are waiting in the conference room.” He grins. “Bring your laptop, I need detailed meeting notes.”

The long table’s polished surface in the boardroom reflects the harsh overhead lights. Brando takes a seat at the head, and I drop down beside him as I open my laptop, feeling out of place among the stuffy businessmen in their thousand-dollar suits. I get ready to copy down everything that transpires during the meeting.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” Brando announces. His presence automatically commands the room, and the chatting murmurs recede like the tide. “You are probably already guessing why I have called this meeting.”

He pauses and takes a deep breath as I furiously type notes on my laptop. “You are aware that we have not seen eye to eye over the past months, and that I was looking for a way to take this firm in another direction.”

The board members around the table exchange glances, shifting in their seats uncomfortably.

“As of last night, I control 60 percent of the shares. The first thing I want to do in my new capacity is to dissolve the Board of Directors,” Brando continues, as a low murmur spreads. “Change is overdue, and we are starting immediately. I will bring this firm into the twenty-first century by modernizing its processes and initiating new environmentally friendly projects that will not only serve our bottom line, but also ensure a future for the children of our children.”

The board members listen intently, their expressions ranging from skeptical to hopeful.

“Change is indeed overdue,” a slender woman with a stern expression breaks the tense silence. “Your father’s stubbornness has held the firm back for far too long. Sanders International needs to embrace modernity if it wants to stay competitive.”

“Indeed,” chimes in another. He flashes an encouraging grin in Brando’s and my direction. “Your resourcefulness is exactly what this company needs.”

An equal measure of pride and gratitude wash over me as a few more members express their support, while others continue looking grim. Brando looks pleased, his posture relaxed and confident.

“Alright, then,” the board president concludes. “We will put it up to a vote at the next shareholders meeting, and we will propose a new governance structure. It is pro forma, since Brando now holds the majority of the shares.”

As the meeting adjourns, Brando turns to me. His fingers lightly brush against mine as the board members filter out of the room. As soon as it’s just us, his gaze turns serious. “There’s one more thing. Now that it’s official, I need to go down to Palm Beach to tell my father in person. You are coming with me.” His tone doesn’t allow for dissent.

I hesitate for a moment, my heart pounding in my chest, scared but also excited. “Fl-Florida? With you? Why?”

Brando’s fingers brush against mine, sending a jolt of electricity through my body.

“Why not?”

Though I feel an overwhelming urge to run away, I force myself to step back. Fear and excitement battle within me. This is happening too fast.

My heart is in my throat as I stutter out a response. I know I should accept, but all I can think about are the obstacles ahead: his father’s disapproval and, most of all, how quickly things

could go wrong. I'm not sure if I'm making the right decision, but Brando's grip on my hand doesn't allow me to say no.

"Yes, I ... I don't know ... yes," I grind out, finally figuring out how to string a verb and a subject together. "This is unexpected."

His grip on my hand is gentle, yet firm.

He's not letting me go.

CHAPTER 22



BRANDO

THE HEAVY SCENT OF SALTWATER AND BOUGAINVILLEA permeates the Florida air as I step out of the car, adjusting my tie. Ana follows, stunning in her little black dress, a far cry from her usual attire. I take a moment to appreciate her beauty, the way her dress hugs her curves, and the way her hair falls in soft waves around her face. Addison skips ahead, laughing as she takes in the sights and sounds of Palm Beach's lavish Royal Poinciana Way district, with its luxury shops, lush landscaping, and Mediterranean-inspired architecture.

I can't help but smile at her infectious energy.

As we approach the entrance to the upscale restaurant, I notice my father standing outside, showcasing the ever-present scowl on his face. I feel a twinge of irritation.

"Dad, I want you to meet Ana." I embrace him and step back. He is not an easy man to please, and I can't shake the feeling that he's not thrilled. It's not surprising, considering that I now firmly hold the reins of Sanders International in my hands.

"Nice to meet you, Ana," my father says in a tone that doesn't quite match his forced smile. "I'm glad that Brando has finally decided to hire himself an assistant."

I can tell that he's sizing her up, trying to find something to criticize.

"Actually," Addison interjects, "Ana is Dad's girlfriend!"

"Sweetheart," I sigh, rubbing my temples and looking at Ana apologetically.

“Why don’t we all go sit down?” My father cuts me off with a wave of his hand, though for a split second, an aghast expression slips through his perfectly poised mask.

“I’m starving, and there will be plenty of time to delve into your,” he gives Ana a critical once-over that makes my blood boil, “social life over dinner.”

Ana swallows, and I squeeze her hand as we follow him inside. The restaurant is dimly lit, with candles flickering on every table. The soft lighting and hushed conversations around us create an atmosphere of refined elegance, but it does nothing to ease the tension crackling between us.

“Brando,” my father growls, looking at Ana, “is what Addison said true?”

I lay my napkin in my lap and put my arm around Ana’s shoulders. “You bet.”

He turns toward Ana, deepening his scowl. I am just about done with his antics.

“I brought Ana with me to meet you, and I would appreciate it if you treat her with respect.” My voice rises, anger bubbling up inside me.

He glares at me. I take a deep breath and steady my voice. “Ana is my girlfriend. She’s also my assistant. Things of that sort happen every now and then.” I grin sheepishly, shaking off my upset. “I wanted you to meet her because she’s an important part of my life and my work. I didn’t bring her here to upset you.”

Before he can respond, the waiter arrives to take our orders.

The rest of the meal is a tense affair. Addison’s chattering is a godsend, and despite my father’s sulky mood, he can’t help but ask her questions about school and her friends. But once Addison tires of entertaining the old man, the silence is only broken by the occasional clinking of silverware against plates and the muffled sounds of the street.

Once we order dessert, I turn to him. “Should we talk about the real reason you are upset?”

He finally looks me in the eye and sighs deeply. “I appreciate your enthusiasm and the ambition you have for Sanders International. But please understand that I am feeling reluctant about changing the direction we’ve established over the years. This company is my life’s work, and I have a deep attachment to the way things have been done.”

“I understand, Dad, but we need to adapt to modern times. And we have social responsibility.”

“I don’t think you have thought this all the way through, Brando. Major change brings risks. Why tinker with a thing that’s working, that’s been working for forty years?”

“Because times have changed. We need to innovate and explore new opportunities. I am not looking to erase what you have built,” I say, taking his hand. “I only want to build upon it. Your experience and knowledge are invaluable, and I hope you will continue advising me.”

My father sighs deeply and shrugs, looking at Addison. “You better make sure you do well, especially for this little one,” he says tenderly and strokes her cheek. “This company means a lot to me, son. And so do you and Addison.”

I nod as we stand up and make our way back to the car. The night air is cool and refreshing after the stifling atmosphere of the restaurant, and I take a deep breath, calming my nerves.

OVER THE NEXT THREE DAYS, we enjoy the sun-soaked shores of Florida. The sand is warm beneath my feet as Addison and Ana splash in the waves, laughter filling the air.

“Come on, Brando! Join us!” Ana calls out to me, her blue eyes sparkling against the setting sun. Reluctantly, I wade into the ocean, cool water wrapping around my legs.

“Alright, you got me,” I admit, splashing water back at them playfully.

“See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?” She smirks, and her laughter is like music to my ears.

We spend our days exploring Florida’s many attractions. We take a day trip to Disney World, where I win Addison a stuffed animal and spend a fortune on souvenirs that will never fit into

our suitcases. We enjoy a lavish dinner at the hotel's renowned restaurant, where Ana insists we order dessert.

But the best part of the days are the evenings, after Addison falls into bed, spent and happy.

I lie in bed, my heart pounding in anticipation. As the door opens and Ana steps into the room, moonlight traces around her silhouette like an ethereal embrace. We don't need to speak, our eyes lock in a knowing gaze.

"Come here," I whisper, my voice brimming with desire.

She strides over without a second thought, and our lips meet hungrily, a flood of passion consuming us both. Our bodies entwine together, creating their own spellbinding rhythm that only we understand.

My pulse is racing as I explore every inch of her with my tongue, each touch setting off sparks. The aroma of her skin and the honeyed taste of her lips drives me wild, my control slipping further away with each passing minute.

"You feel so good," I murmur against her lips as I break away and start to kiss her neck.

Her hands explore my body, setting me ablaze. I can feel her desire growing with every touch, and it drives me into a frenzy.

"I love how you make me feel," she whispers as I move my lips down her body, savoring the taste of her skin. Her breath quickens as I reach her breasts, and I take each one into my mouth, teasing her hard nipples with my tongue.

Ana moans, her nails digging into my back, as her body quivers beneath me.

She murmurs under her breath as my aroused cock presses up against her. She wraps her legs tightly around me and pulls me closer, yearning for more. I carefully enter her, and she gasps at the sensation. "Yes, yes!"

I smile as our bodies move in unison while I thrust deeper and deeper into her, feeling a shuddering pleasure course through every cell of my body.

Her breathing quickens as our movements become ever more passionate. Her body quivers as I continue thrusting into her. I'm on fire, and I can feel our orgasms rising together; her legs locked around me, pushing us further and further.

I pant, nearing my climax while she whimpers in pleasure. As she comes undone, our moans fill the room, and I spill myself inside her.

We finally let go of each other, collapsing into a tight embrace. With no strength left to spare, we lay there until sleep takes us away.

The next morning, we step onto the balcony, the salty sea breeze caressing our skin. We stand side by side, gazing out at the vast expanse of the ocean.

“Brando,” Ana murmurs, her voice barely audible above the sound of the crashing waves. “What happens when we go back to New York?”

“We’ll take it one day at a time,” I reassure her, smiling. “But one thing I know for sure.”

“What’s that?”

“I want you by my side.”

CHAPTER 23



ANA

A FEW DAYS LATER, A GROUP OF SMARTLY DRESSED YOUNG men approach my desk.

“We’re here to see Brando,” the oldest one announces, just as the door to Brando’s office swings open.

“Tom, good to see you,” he says, shaking the men’s hands. I stand by the doorway, my curiosity piqued. They carry their laptops and folders, their expressions a mix of anticipation and determination.

“Come right in. Ana, you too, please join us.”

I step into the room, my heart racing.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Please, have a seat,” Brando gestures toward the sofa in his office.

He looks at me with a satisfied grin.

“Ana, I think you’ll want to hear what they have to say.”

I take a seat beside Brando, my eyes shifting between him and the men. What could this be about? I can’t help but feel a tinge of excitement, wondering what surprise awaits.

The men open their laptops and drop large folders on the low table. The glass windows offer a breathtaking view of the city skyline.

“Alright,” Tom begins, sliding a thick stack of papers toward us. “We’ve reviewed the project proposal you shared with us. After conducting the necessary evaluations and preliminary discussions with city officials, we’re thrilled to inform you

that the City of New York has approved the implementation of blockchain technology for energy trading between consumers with solar panels. You can now go ahead and work out how to pilot it in Brooklyn.” He pauses. “Overall, the numbers look good. Better than good,” he concludes with a satisfied grin.

My heart skips a beat, and a smile tugs at the corners of my lips. Knowing that Brando believes in the blockchain energy trading project fills me with a sense of gratitude and excitement.

“That’s fantastic news. I knew this idea had potential. Now it’s becoming a reality.”

Everyone nods, a shared sense of accomplishment filling the room.

Brando turns to me. “I didn’t want to get your hopes up until I had concrete news. But now that we know the city is on board, I want you to be closely involved in this project. I know how much it means to you.”

I might melt into a puddle right here in his office. “I’m beyond excited,” I manage to say, my cheeks starting to burn from how wide I’m grinning.

Brando smiles, his gaze locking with mine. “I know you’ll bring great insight and passion to this effort.”

We discuss a few more details about the immediate next steps, and as the meeting draws to a close, the men gather their laptops and folders. One by one, they bid us farewell and exit the office.

Brando’s gaze lingers on me. “This is the direction I want Sanders International to move toward,” he says. “Let’s make it happen.”

AT THE END of a long day at the office, I’m finally heading out. Brando has a few more calls to make and then he’ll pick me up from my place for dinner. As I step on the street into a humid New York evening, a tall, beautiful woman approaches me.

“Ana Layne?” she asks, her voice terse.

“That’s me,” I stammer, taken aback by her hostile demeanor.
“Have we met?”

“Not yet,” the woman sneers. “I’m Veronica, Brando’s girlfriend.”

I remember her sultry voice now. She used to call him every so often, and only now do I realize that she hasn’t called the office recently.

“Ex-girlfriend, you mean?”

“I’m pregnant with Brando’s baby, so I think it will be future wife, in fact,” she says triumphantly, holding a hand over her slightly protruding belly. “Stay away from him, or I will make your life a living hell,” she warns and walks away. I am left standing in the middle of the street, my mouth gaping in shock.

I make it to my apartment in a confused haze and storm through the front door, tears streaming down my face. The heartbreak bears down on me like a suffocating blanket. How could I have been so stupid? Even if he broke up with her when he started to pursue me, she is now pregnant. The realization cuts through me like a knife.

“What’s wrong, Ana?” Race approaches me with concern, sitting next to me on the couch.

Tears spill down my cheeks as I sink onto the couch, wrapping my arms around myself. “It’s Brando ... he’s going to have a baby with someone else,” I manage to choke out, my voice trembling.

“Come again?”

“You heard it right. His ex confronted me on the street earlier. She’s carrying his baby,” I sniffle, wiping away my tears.

Race sits beside me, gently placing a hand on my shoulder. “Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry,” he says softly, his eyes full of compassion.

Unable to contain my anguish, I collapse onto the couch and pull out my phone. Why didn’t I do this earlier? It’s time to face the truth. With trembling fingers, I open the browser and

type in Brando's name. The search results appear, and my heart sinks as I see images of Brando and Veronica splashed across the New York society pages.

"Look here," I turn the phone to Race, sobbing. "Just look at them!"

There they are, smiling and radiant at the Met Gala, just weeks before I started working at Sanders International. The evidence is undeniable. Veronica and Brando have had a relationship, and I was completely oblivious.

But so what? I've had previous relationships, too. He obviously broke up with her after we started seeing each other. Only now, she's expecting his baby, which changes everything. I can't be the one standing in the way of a child and its father. That would be monstrous, and I won't do it, no matter what it costs me.

I look up at Race. "What do I do now? I can't just pretend like there is no baby in the picture. A child needs their father."

My mind races with a whirlwind of emotions. Anger, hurt, and confusion entangle within me, leaving me feeling lost and devastated.

A knock at the door interrupts my turbulent thoughts. It's Brando, coming to pick me up for dinner. But I have no desire to face him.

"Ana, maybe you should talk to him. It's not like you to shut people out like this," Race says softly.

"I can't do this right now," I reply, my voice weak.

I ignore my ringing phone and the text messages that start coming in. I want to shut the world out, to wallow in my pain and confusion.

"You do need to talk to him, my friend," Race urges me.

"I'm not ready to hear it."

Brando knocks on the door a few more times before our neighbor emerges from her apartment.

“Could you please keep it down, folks? I’m trying to meditate, for Pete’s sake!”

I hear a door slam behind her, and Brando sighs in desperation. Eventually, his footsteps fade as he walks away.

Finally, I fall asleep on the sofa, sobbing on Race’s lap.

The next morning, I march into Brando’s office without a word, slamming my resignation letter onto his desk. His eyes widen.

“What was that last night? What’s this?” he attempts as he looks at the letter in confusion, but I don’t give him a chance to speak.

“Save it,” I snap. My voice trembles with hurt, and the lump rises in my throat, but I do my best to push it down. I won’t let him see me break. And I have to stay strong enough to get through this. “I don’t want to hear it. Go talk to Veronica. She’s pregnant, and that’s the end of us.”

His eyes widen in surprise. “What?”

“That’s right. You’ll become a daddy again.”

“What the hell? Ana, please.” He stands up and pleads, “Let me go speak to Veronica, and we’ll sort everything out.” Desperation is etched on his face as he realizes the gravity of his situation.

“Sort everything out?” I scoff, shaking my head. “A woman is expecting your child. Addison will have a baby brother or sister. On top of it, this delightful lady threatened me, saying that if I ever came near you again, she would make my life a living hell. And I can’t even blame her for it. I would have done the exact same thing. So, tell me, Brando, how do we fix that?”

Before he can respond, I turn on my heel and leave, tears streaming down my cheeks.

CHAPTER 24



BRANDO

I TAKE A DEEP BREATH, MY HEART POUNDING WITH A MIX OF anger and frustration as I stand outside Veronica's apartment.

One would think that she could have informed me about her pregnancy in person.

Or that she could have come to me before accosting Ana in the middle of the street.

As the door finally swings open, our eyes meet, and I'm reminded of how attractive she is. Tall, with long dark hair, a sultry voice that once held a seductive allure, and now a small baby belly she protectively holds. She is the ultimate expression of New York elite and privilege. Memories of our past flood my mind, but all I feel is a wave of annoyance and resentment.

"I was wondering when you would show up," Veronica purrs, attempting to sound casual, though her voice holds a hint of nervousness. "Please come in," she says as she steps aside and lets me pass.

"So, you're telling people that you're pregnant with my child," I say as I step forward, my voice betraying the irritation I feel.

She takes a moment to react, her gaze avoiding mine. "You haven't been responding to my calls. I had to get your attention somehow."

She does have a point. I have been ignoring the myriad messages she has left on my cell, thinking I had been quite

clear that we were over. Now I realize it might have been better if I had returned one of her many calls.

I sigh, my voice filled with controlled intensity. “So, how are you feeling?”

She raises an eyebrow, surprised by my question.

“I’m good, thanks for asking. The first trimester was brutal, but I’m feeling much better now.” She gestures for me to come into her expansive living room overlooking the park. We spent many mornings together on this very sofa.

I narrow my eyes in anger.

“You went to speak to Ana, Veronica. Without informing me first. Also, without confirming that the baby is mine. That’s not something I can tolerate.”

She looks hurt, but there’s also a hint of defiance in her eyes. “You know we were together during that time. There was no one else, and there is no need to confirm it one way or another. This child is yours, without any doubt.”

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my emotions in check.

“You and I were never together, for one. We were occasional fuckbuddies, and I was crystal clear about it from the very beginning.”

I pause to take a deep, cleansing breath.

“I certainly don’t appreciate you surprising and threatening the woman who *is* my girlfriend with such information.”

She crosses her arms protectively, sensing my upset. Her voice is dripping with sarcasm as she responds, “I’m pregnant with your child. That does change a few things, doesn’t it?”

I cross my legs, my frustration simmering beneath the surface. There’s little point arguing about what we were to each other. She is clearly pregnant, and the timing works. The child is very likely mine.

But I want to make sure.

“I fell in love, Veronica. It wasn’t planned, and I’m not sorry for it. No strings attached, that was the deal between us,

remember?

“But I am pregnant now.” She sighs and dabs her eyes with a napkin.

“I’m aware. And the child is likely mine. I’ll accept it, but I want proof.”

“What do you want then, Brando?” her voice quivers, a mix of frustration and vulnerability. “Do you want a paternity test? Is that what it will take for you to believe me?”

I nod, my resolve firm. “Yes, I think that’s the best way to resolve this. I need to know for sure.”

She scoffs. “For sure? Are you seriously doubting me? After everything we shared?”

“This is not about you and me. It’s about the child you are carrying. And I want what’s best for it, regardless of whether it’s mine or not.” My voice is firm and unwavering. “If you’re so sure, then taking a prenatal paternity test shouldn’t be an issue. It’s non-invasive, with no risk to you or the baby. It’s the only way to put the uncertainty to rest.”

Veronica’s expression shifts, a mix of reluctance and desperation. “Brando, can’t we just trust each other? We had something special. We fit together so well.”

I shake my head, my voice resolute. “That’s in the past, Veronica. I have no intention of marrying you or being with you anymore. But if this child is mine, I will be a father to it in every sense of the word. The child will be a part of my family, too. You and I will come to a custody arrangement that works for both of us, and in return, I will provide generously for both of you. You have my word.”

She takes a moment, her gaze wavering. The weight of my ultimatum sinks in, and the realization of her situation becomes clear. Reluctantly, she nods.

“Fine. If it means that much to you, I’ll take the test. But don’t think I’m doing it for you. I’m doing it for our baby.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” I say and reach out for her hand. As she starts sobbing, I sit next to her and wrap an arm around her

shoulders.

“Veronica, please don’t cry. It’s not good for the baby.”

Her sobs won’t subside.

“We wouldn’t be the first patchwork family that ever walked this planet, I’m sure of that,” I offer, as she continues to heave.

While I try to comfort her as best I can, my mind is a whirlwind. If this child is indeed mine, it will change everything.

But despite the unconventional setup, welcoming a new child to the family would be exciting.

Explaining it to Addison won’t be easy. But I am sure that in the end, she would be thrilled.

And regardless of what the test says, Ana is the one I want.

A FEW WEEKS LATER, I’m knocking on Ana and Race’s apartment door. Since Ana stormed out of my office, I haven’t been able to talk to her. My calls and messages are left unanswered, and Charlotte has been of no help, regardless of how much I threatened her. It’s as if Ana disappeared from the face of the Earth, unreachable by phone, email or social media.

But now that I have certainty, I need to find her and talk to her about the paternity test results. Race is my last hope before I turn to hiring a private investigator.

I ring the doorbell, and a few moments later, Race opens the door with his usual flair.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the dashing Brando Sanders at our doorstep. What brings you here?” Race asks, giving me a playful wink.

I smile, despite the shitty situation. How could I have not seen it right away that Race was gay? Now that I know, it is clear as day.

“I need to talk to Ana,” I reply, trying to keep my tone calm and composed despite Race’s flamboyance.

He tilts his head and purses his lips, striking a dramatic pose. “I’m afraid Ana isn’t here right now. She needs some space to

work through all her emotions and such. “

I furrow my brow in frustration.

“Race, cut the crap, man. I really need to find her. This is important.”

He fans himself with a dramatic flair. “Oh my, someone’s in a tizzy! Can’t it wait? Let her cool off and find her way back to you on her own.”

“I’m afraid that’s not going to work, Race. It’s about the paternity test,” I say, trying to convey the urgency of the situation.

Race’s eyes widen, and he leans in, intrigued. “You got the results already? Spill the tea!”

I nod. “Yes, and I need to talk to Ana about it. It’s important that we figure things out, for everyone’s sake, including Addison’s.”

Race lets out a melodramatic sigh. “Oh, the drama! So, it’s yours, then? Ana asked me not to tell you where she is. She doesn’t want to see you, my friend. “

“I understand that, but it’s important,” I say, hoping he’ll cave.

Race looks torn, his flamboyance momentarily subdued. “She’s been through a lot, and I can’t betray her trust.”

I can see how much he cares about Ana and respects her wishes, but I can’t let this opportunity slip away. I need to find her and have a conversation, for all our sakes.

“Race, please, I know you care about Ana, and you want what’s best for her. I need to talk to her, and I need to talk to her right now. I miss her. And Addison is terribly upset with me that Ana is not around.”

Race puts his hand on his hip, striking a sassy pose. “You’re in a tight spot, my friend.” He sighs dramatically. “I’ll tell you where she is, but you better treat her right, you hear me?”

“I promise, Race. I’ll make her happy.”

Race writes down the address on a piece of paper and hands it to me with a flourish.

As I step outside, I finally look at the address.
Big Island, Hawaii?

CHAPTER 25



ANA

THE SUN RISES OVER THE LUSH KONA COFFEE FIELDS, PAINTING the sky with hues of pink and gold. I take a deep breath, inhaling the intoxicating scent of freshly brewed coffee that permeates the air.

I can't believe I'm here, on a coffee farm in Hawaii, far away from the bustling streets of downtown NYC. This turned out to be my sanctuary, my escape from the chaos of the city and from my heartbreak.

The coffee farm is nestled on the slopes of a volcanic mountain, where the fertile soil and perfect climate create the ideal conditions for growing the finest coffee beans. The farm owners, a warm and welcoming couple, Kai and Leilani, have become like family to me in these short few weeks. They've taught me a lot about coffee beans—from harvesting to roasting—and I've fallen in love with this art form.

What better way for me to rebuild both my life and my business than on this island?

My days are a beautiful rhythm of simplicity and purpose, an idyll I often dreamed of as a child.

I wake with the sunrise, greeted by the gentle chirping of birds. After a vigorous yoga session on the porch, I spend the first few hours of the day tending to the coffee plants, carefully inspecting each tree for ripe, crimson cherries ready for harvest.

There's something therapeutic about the process—the connection to nature and the land, the sense of nurturing

something from seed to cup.

Living in the moment is easy in the midst of this perfection.

After a satisfying morning's work, I join Kai and Leilani in the roastery, where we meticulously roast the beans to perfection. The crackling sound of the roaster and the aroma of the freshly roasted beans are music to my ears. Every batch is a masterpiece of flavors waiting to be savored.

I spend the afternoons in their artisanal coffee shop, tending to the tourists, privileged to do the work I love most—creating coffee drinks and connecting with people.

In the evenings, there is still time to explore the island and immerse myself in its natural beauty. The days are long here. I take short hikes through lush rainforests, swim in crystal-clear waters, and bask in the warm embrace of the setting sun on secluded beaches.

Life in Hawaii is slower, more wholesome, and I've come to appreciate the simple joys it offers.

Despite the beauty of my environment and the fulfillment I find in the work, thoughts of Brando still linger. I mourn the loss of our relationship. The pain of losing him is like a constant companion, a shadow that lingers.

But he will become a father again, and I can't stand in the way of his child's happiness. It is best that I removed myself from his life, not only for his unborn child's sake, but also for Addison's.

I wish things could be different. But unfortunately, love is sometimes not enough.

In the evenings, I sit under a canopy of stars, sipping on a cup of tea and planning my next steps. I can't help but smile, knowing that this is where I belong.

With every passing day, I like this place more and more—its people, its culture, and its sense of community. There are no big corporations here, no reminders of the life I left behind in the city. It's just me, the coffee, and the freedom to start anew.

While working in Kai and Leilani's shop, I've been thinking about opening one of my own, right here where the beans are grown. With the money from the sale of my building, I'd have enough capital to start a new shop and carve out a fresh path for myself.

The thought excites me. There is no better coffee bean than the freshly harvested one. Brewing it this close to the source gives the coffee a unique vibrancy and brightness, impossible to replicate otherwise.

I wipe down the last table in the coffee shop, preparing to close up for the day. The warm Hawaiian breeze drifts through the open windows, carrying the scent of the ocean air. The soft hum of the espresso machine, the smell of freshly ground beans, and the familiar faces of my regulars all weave together into a comforting atmosphere.

I remember the first day I started working at the farm. I was nervous and unsure of myself, but the friendly faces and warm atmosphere quickly put me at ease. Over time, I've come to know my repeat customers by name, and I've even learned some of their favorite drinks by heart. The tourists stay for a couple of weeks, and then they move on. But while they are on Kona, they are my regulars, coming for their coffee fix without fail. It's a small, but meaningful way to connect with the people in my community.

As I sling my apron over the chair, I wonder how long this sanctuary will last. The rain season is in full swing, and I've noticed a decline in customers over the past weeks. But I take pride in my work and the role I play in creating a welcoming space.

"See you tomorrow, Ana," says my coworker, Nalani, waving from behind the counter. I give her a small smile and a wave before heading in the opposite direction.

As I turn around, I notice Brando sitting at a table in the far corner, his arms crossed over his chest, looking at me with those earnest eyes that used to make my heart flutter. His hazel eyes lock onto mine, and I feel like a deer caught in headlights. I don't want to talk to him, especially now that I

have regained a sense of normalcy, but there's something magnetic about his presence.

My heart flutters, the memories of our past flooding my mind. I try to avoid his gaze, pretending to be busy with closing tasks, hoping he'll take the hint and leave. But deep down, I know that won't happen. Brando has always been persistent, and he's come all this way for a reason.

I can feel him approaching me as I stand behind the counter, avoiding eye contact. "Ana," he says softly. His heavy gaze prickles my skin.

I swallow, my heart scurrying like water over rocks. There is a sizzle in the air, and I force myself to smile and respond coolly, "Brando, it's been a while. What brings you to Hawaii?"

He hesitates for a moment. "Addison misses you," he grinds out. His eyes darken as he rakes his gaze over my form. "And so do I."

His voice is low and strained, like a lion waiting to pounce on his prey. His proximity makes me tingle from head to toe, and I step further behind the counter, hoping to create distance between us. He smiles at my sorry attempt to evade him and circles around the counter, his large frame casting a shadow over me.

"Things got complicated," I offer weakly as I look up at him.

"Stop running, woman. Hear what I have to tell you."

His voice is firm and demanding. I know he won't take no for an answer, and I decide to hear him out.

"Fine," I sigh and fold my arms. "But you shouldn't have come all the way here."

"And let you hide out on a coffee farm forever? It's certainly your prerogative, but you should know that the paternity test came back negative," he continues, searching for my eyes, which I keep glued to my toes.

"I don't want to hear about it," I mumble impulsively, my heart thumping wildly.

He steps closer. “That doesn’t interest you?” he asks as he puts his hand on my waist, pulling me to him. “Now, listen to me. I won’t allow this to come between us. Yes, Veronica and I were lovers, but that was before I even knew you existed. Once you came into my life, I ended things with her. Even before I knew that you would have me.” He cups my chin, forcing me to look at him. His touch is warm and comforting, familiar, and I hate myself for liking it this much.

“When Veronica announced that she was pregnant, I was certain that the child was mine. The timing was right. But as it turns out, it is not my kid. I want you to know that even if the baby was mine, there would have been no future with Veronica either way, not like there is with you. We would have worked out a custody arrangement, and I would have been a willing father to my child. I would have made sure that Addison had a relationship with them. But I am not the man for Veronica.”

Tears are blurring my vision. He leans down and gently brushes his lips over mine.

“I love you, and I want us to be together,” he whispers. “You are mine. I am yours.”

I remain silent, tears streaming down my face.

“I’m willing to do whatever it takes to have you back. Please tell me you will come back to us.”

I am unable to speak. My heart is thumping so hard, and it’s as if I lost the ability to put a simple thought together.

“Ever since you left, things haven’t been the same,” he continues, his gaze never leaving mine. “You became a part of our family.”

He hesitates, and I hold my breath.

“I love you deeply, Ana.”

My heart races and my cheeks flush. I’m relieved to hear he still feels the same way I do.

“Let’s take a walk,” he suggests and gestures for me to go ahead of him. I quickly close up the shop and take his arm,

falling into step beside him. We walk in silence for a few moments.

He stops and runs a hand through his dark hair. “Addison misses you.”

The wind picks up around us, making me shiver. He looks at me, something soft and tender in his gaze that I haven’t seen before. “I promise you, I won’t let anyone come between us again.” Brando’s words are raw with conviction, and his grip on my hand tightens. “Whatever it takes, I’ll protect you.”

My heart swells. I close the gap between us, wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing my cheek to his chest. His heart beats steadily beneath my ear, grounding me and connecting us in a way I never thought possible.

“I love you, Brando,” I whisper, and he responds by gently resting his chin on top of my head. I wish I could hold onto this moment forever.

I lift my gaze to meet his, and without another word, our lips crash together in a passionate kiss. His hands cup my face, and I can feel the heat of his body against mine, fueling the fire that’s been smoldering between us.

As the kiss deepens, I lose myself in the taste and touch of the man I’ve grown to love.

“Let’s go home,” Brando murmurs against my lips, and I willingly take his hand.

EPILOGUE



ANA

ADDISON'S FOURTEENTH BIRTHDAY PARTY IS IN FULL SWING, and I can't help but marvel at how much effort has gone into making this celebration perfect for her. Balloons in various shades of pink and silver float above the meticulously arranged dining table, adorned with an elegant centerpiece and a shimmering metallic tablecloth.

Laughter fills the air as guests mingle, sipping on champagne and snacking on delicious finger foods. Race is here, arm in arm with his boyfriend, both wearing wide, contagious smiles. They're deep in conversation with Charlotte, who looks radiant in a white summer dress, standing beside her doting husband.

I glance around, taking note of all the little details that make this party so special. From the whimsical fairy lights strung on the ceiling, to the mouthwatering dessert table laden with delicate pastries and a towering cake, it's clear that no expense has been spared. And the person responsible for orchestrating all these wonders is none other than Charlotte.

"Char," I say, catching her attention as she finishes her conversation, "this party is absolutely stunning. You've outdone yourself."

"Thank you, Ana," she replies, beaming with pride. "It's easy to do when funds for the party are unlimited." She grins conspiratorially. "And it's the least I could do for Addison. She deserves a magical day."

“It’s not just the decorations,” I continue. “The food, the music, the atmosphere—everything is perfect.”

“Addison is like family to me,” Charlotte says softly, her eyes glistening with affection. “When Brando asked for my help, I couldn’t say no. Besides, organizing events like this is my forte, and I enjoyed every minute of it. Seeing everyone here, happy and enjoying themselves, is all the thanks I need.”

“Speaking of everyone being here,” I say, glancing around the room, “where’s Brando?”

“Last time I saw him, he was talking to a colleague by the buffet table.”

“Thanks,” I say, my hand instinctively moving to rest on my swollen belly. “I’ll find him.” At nine months pregnant, it’s nearly impossible not to think about the little life growing inside me—a beautiful reminder of the love Brando and I share.

As I make my way through the crowd, I can’t help but admire how handsome my husband looks, dressed in a crisp navy suit that brings out the warmth in his hazel eyes. He catches my gaze and immediately excuses himself from the conversation, walking toward me with a beaming smile.

“Hey, beautiful.” He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me close for a gentle kiss. “How are you feeling?”

“Happy, tired, and slightly overwhelmed,” I admit with a laugh, leaning into his comforting embrace. “But mostly happy.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he asks, genuine concern shining in his eyes.

“Right now, just holding me is enough.”

I’ve been feeling achy for the most part of the day, but I decided to disregard it and focus on the party. Suddenly, my abdomen tightens and I’m unable to ignore it any longer.

“Oh!”

My hand flies to my baby bump, and I nearly double over.

“Ana? Is the baby coming?” Brando guides me to a chair, and I gratefully sink into it.

“I’d put my money on it,” I wince through the pain and point to the puddle of water on the floor.

The moment the words leave my mouth, the room seems to freeze. Like a drop of ink in water, shock spreads through the crowd as they process what’s happening. Char’s eyes widen, and she clasps her hands over her mouth. Race and his boyfriend exchange excited glances, while Addison watches with wide-eyed curiosity.

“Okay, everyone,” Brando announces, barely missing a beat. Stepping right into CEO mode. “Ana is going into labor. We need to get her to the hospital.”

“I’ll call an ambulance,” Char offers, already pulling out her phone.

He shakes his head. “Better call her obstetrician and tell her to meet us at the hospital. The number is on my desk in the study. We’ll head over there.”

Race approaches us with a gentle smile. “You are amazing, Ana Banana. I can’t believe you’re about to become a mom!”

“Neither can I.” I laugh nervously, clutching Brando’s hand for support. “I’m a bit scared.”

“You’ll do great,” Race comforts me, squeezing my shoulder.

“Ana, focus on your breathing,” Brando instructs, gently guiding me to the elevator.

“Thanks, babe,” I manage to say through gritted teeth as another contraction rattles me. “This baby sure knows how to make an entrance, huh?”

“Like mother, like child.” Brando grins as we reach the garage, and he opens the passenger door for me. “Hang in there, baby. We’ll be at the hospital in no time,” he adds, jumping into the car and shifting it into gear.

The ride is a blur of motion, adrenaline, and the distant sound of sirens. Brando’s hands grip the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turn white as he maneuvers through traffic with

expert precision. Rain beats against the windshield, turning the streets slick and shiny. I shiver, partly from the wet chill and partly from the anticipation.

“Almost there, Ana,” Brando’s brows crease with worry, but he keeps his gaze focused on the road ahead of him. “Just breathe. “

“Doing ... my best,” I reply, clutching my tightening belly between two contractions that are turning both stronger and more frequent. This baby seems to be in a rush to come out now.

As we approach the hospital, Brando swerves around slower vehicles. My heart pounds in time with the wipers swiping away the relentless raindrops.

“Brando, be careful!” I shout, gripping the door handle for dear life.

“Sorry, darling, just trying to get us there as fast as possible,” he apologizes, slowing down slightly.

Finally, we pull into the hospital’s entrance, and Brando parks the car haphazardly in front of the emergency room. Brando jumps out of the car and runs to open my door, helping me out and supporting me as we make our way inside.

The hospital is a flurry of activity, filled with medical staff rushing around, patients waiting anxiously, and the ever-present smell of antiseptic. A nurse spots us and hurries over upon noticing my condition.

“Let’s get you to the maternity ward,” she says briskly, whisking me in. “Did you notify your doctor?”

“She should be on her way. Dr. Jaffee,” Brando mumbles, his voice strained with concern as he pushes me down the hallway.

“Brando,” I gasp, clutching my stomach as another contraction hits. “I’m frightened.”

“Hey, look at me,” he says softly, meeting my eyes. “You can do this. You come from generations of women who have done this successfully. You hear me? “

I nod, biting my lip and trying to steady my breathing as we finally reach the delivery room. The nurse pushes open the door, revealing a simple bed with monitoring and IV equipment next to it. As soon as I'm finished changing into a hospital gown, Dr. Jaffee walks in.

"Alright, Mrs. Sanders," the doctor says gently, guiding me onto the bed. "Are you ready to meet your baby today?"

Another powerful contraction washes over me, rendering me speechless, my belly tightening to steel.

After checking me, Dr. Jaffee cheerfully announces, "You're fully dilated, Ana. Your baby wants to come out. With your next contraction, I want you to push as hard as you can."

The pain surges through me again, and I do as I was told, groaning and gripping the sides of the hospital bed. Brando stands beside me, his hand firmly wrapped around mine. "Keep breathing, Ana. You're doing great," he whispers. I close my eyes in the short interlude, exhausted and dreading the next wave. It's hard to think of anything else.

"Ana, when you feel the next contraction, I need you to push with all your strength," the doctor instructs. Her voice is steady and reassuring. I nod, sweat beading on my forehead, my chest heaving from the effort.

Soon enough the next wave of pain hits, and I bear down, pushing with every ounce of energy I have.

"Almost there, just a few more pushes," the doctor encourages. I feel like I'm on the brink of collapse, but I can't give up now. We're meeting this baby today.

My vision blurs as I push again. I've never felt so exhausted or vulnerable in my life. But I remind myself that it will all be worth it when I finally get to hold my baby in my arms. "Ana, one last big one!" the doctor commands.

With a primal scream, I give it everything I've got. Finally, the pressure eases, and our baby's cries echo off the walls. Relief washes over me, and I collapse onto the bed, panting. Brando leans down to kiss my forehead, and I feel a sense of overwhelming love for him.

“Congratulations, it’s a healthy girl!” the doctor announces, holding our beautiful, wriggling daughter. Brando and I beam with pride as we look at our baby for the first time. Tears stream down my face as I take in her little fingers and toes, my arms extending to her. She’s perfect in every way.

The nurse wraps her in a towel and places her on my chest, allowing our skin to touch. Her small body is warm and fragile against mine. She is still covered in remnants of blood, amniotic fluid, and an ethereal, creamy coating.

“Dawn,” I say to her, then look at Brando expectantly.

He smiles and nods his head. “Dawn is beautiful,” he affirms and strokes my hair.

“Hello, Dawn,” I whisper, touching her cheek. “I’m your mommy.”

Dawn looks into my eyes, as if recognizing me and greeting me. Then she moves her head weakly, searching for my nipple, and I instinctively help her find it.

“Ana, she’s beautiful,” Brando murmurs, leaning down to press a gentle kiss on Dawn’s forehead. “Just like her mother.”

I can’t help but smile through my tears at his words. “She’s perfect.”

Brando whispers, “I love you, Ana. You were amazing.”

I smile weakly and reach for his hand. It’s hard to believe that our lives have changed so much in just a few short hours. But in this moment, as I look at our daughter and feel Brando’s love, I know that everything is going to be okay.

“Would you like to cut the umbilical cord, Mr. Sanders?” the nurse asks, handing him the scissors.

“Uh, sure,” Brando stammers, his hand steady as he reaches for the scissors and makes the cut. “Please check on Ana again. Is she alright?”

“Ana is perfect,” the nurse reassures him.

“Would you like to hold her?” My voice cracks, but the exhaustion fades slightly when his face lights up.

“Of course,” he replies, carefully taking our daughter from me and cradling her in his strong arms. He radiates pure adoration as he gazes down at her. “Hey there, sweetheart,” he whispers. “I’m your daddy, and I promise to always protect you and love you with all my heart.”

As I watch Brando holding our child, I can’t help but think about how far we’ve come.

“Mom, Dad, can we come in now?” Addison’s excited voice echoes just outside our door.

“Of course, pumpkin,” Brando calls out, his eyes never leaving our daughter.

The door swings open, and Addison rushes in, followed by Brando’s father, Charlotte and her husband, Race and his boyfriend, Megan, and other close friends who have been patiently waiting for news. Their faces light up when they see the newest addition to our family, and the room fills with joyous laughter and congratulations.

“Meet your baby sister, Dawn,” I say, beaming at Addison.

“Hi, sis,” she whispers, reaching out to touch the baby’s tiny hand. “I’m going to be the best big sister ever.”

The next day is a whirlwind of new experiences and emotions. As we settle into our roles as new parents, Brando shows me the ins and outs of feeding, diaper changing, and soothing our little one. Each moment feels like a precious gift, and we relish every coo, every yawn, every tiny movement.

The hospital staff is incredibly supportive, providing guidance and resources for us as we navigate this new journey. I’m grateful for the lactation consultant who helps me with breastfeeding, and the nurses who teach me how to swaddle and burp our daughter. Brando is a natural at comforting her, and I can’t help but feel my heart swell with pride as I watch him cradle her in his arms.

When it’s time to leave, apprehension and excitement settle between us in equal measure. We carefully pack up our bags, and Brando checks at least five times to make absolutely positive we haven’t forgotten anything. The car ride is filled

with nervous anticipation as we strap our daughter into her car seat for the first time. I sit in the back with her, holding her hand and marveling at how small and delicate she seems.

As we pull into the building garage, I'm overwhelmed that we actually did it. After months of preparation, we're home with our daughter. Brando carries her inside, and we settle into our living room, surrounded by blankets and pillows and the soft glow of the nightlight.

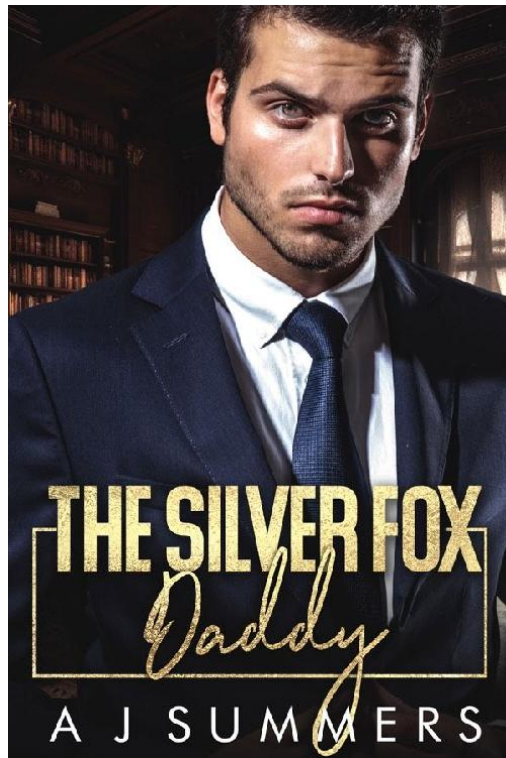
The next few weeks are a blur of sleepless nights, endless feedings, and a learning curve that feels steeper than I ever imagined.

But through it all, Brando is my rock, always there to lend a hand or a shoulder to cry on. Dawn is a constant source of wonder and joy, filling our days with laughter and love.

Becoming a mother has changed me in ways I never thought possible and doing it with the love of my life makes every day that much sweeter.

The End

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THE SILVER FOX DADDY

CHAPTER 1

Upon pulling into my parents' driveway, I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the chaotic scene that awaits me inside. With the Mitchells and my brother's family, there will be more than ten of us crowding around my parents' dining table.

I walk into the house and head straight to the screened-in back porch.

"Monica!" Lyla yells, and she and her brother, Caden, rush over to me from where they had been coloring.

"Hey guys!" I exclaim, bending down to give the two a hug. If there's one good thing about having a brother who is eighteen years older than me, it's getting to hang out with my niece and nephew.

"Mon, finally! We saved a seat for you." My mother points to the outdoor table that is large enough to accommodate both my family and the Mitchells. They've been close family friends ever since my brother was a kid.

The friendship between my brother, Tyler, and his best friend, Jared, brought our families together. They have been inseparable since before I was born, and their bond has only grown stronger as they've aged. Though Jared and Tyler are eighteen years older than me, they've never let an age difference stop them from teasing me, no matter how immature it may seem.

While Tyler and Jared have always had a strong friendship, they have been a thorn in my side in the way only a big brother and his best friend can be. The only reason I tolerate

Jared is because of his son, Archer, who, instead of running up to me like Lyla and Caden, remained off to the side, quietly coloring.

“Do I have to sit here?” I ask in jest, pulling out the chair next to Jared.

“I have no problem with you finding another seat,” Jared tells me with a grin, earning an eye roll from me.

“Would you two stop it?” Maureen, Jared’s mom, chastises from where she sits, pouring herself another glass of lemonade. “How is your job search going, Mon?” Maureen adds, trying to change the subject.

“It’s ok,” I shrug and shoot Jared a side-eye. He has a smirk on his face that makes me scoff under my breath.

Jared is as much of an older brother to me as Tyler is, but an older brother figure I could have done without. By the time I was born, Jared and Tyler were already graduated and on their way to college. But they never seemed to be too far, always finding a chance to come back home and be with family. Sometimes, I think they specifically came back home to terrorize me.

The most irritating thing about Jared is that he’s gorgeous, and he knows it. But admitting it makes me wish for the ground to open up and swallow me whole. Over six feet tall with dark brown hair that looks almost black, which he keeps swept out of his face in a style that is both sophisticated and effortless, he could be a model. Broad shoulders and a tapered waist give him the body that any man would be envious of. His hazel eyes only add to his appeal, helping to soften his, at times, stoic demeanor. I wish he was ugly. Someone so irritating shouldn’t look that good.

“Yeah, Monica, you really need to stop it. You’re twenty-five now,” my brother scolds, pretending to be serious and earning an encouraging laugh from Jared. The occurrence is a common one. Though it’s annoying, I’ve gotten used to it over the years.

“Will you stop picking on your sister?” Tyler’s wife, Maria, says kindly. I’m not sure why such a compassionate soul like Maria decided to subject herself to the antics of my brother, but I’m glad she did. She makes being around Tyler and Jared much more bearable.

“Okay.” Tyler pretends to hang his head dejectedly before letting it shoot up to look at Jared.

“Don’t worry, I got this,” Jared says to Tyler before turning to me. “So, Monica, you still seeing that guy?”

I roll my eyes at his words. “Are you still seeing that girl?” I bite back. Tyler’s eyes widen, and he struggles to hold in a guffaw as Jared’s eyes narrow and the amusement falls from his face.

“Not cool,” he mutters.

“Now Monica, that wasn’t nice.” My dad looks at me sternly.

“He started it,” I say, but I’m sure my protest makes me sound even more like a child, rather than like an adult trying to defend herself. Despite my chastisement, I grin, knowing I got the last laugh.

Looking at my brother, I see him giggling with Maria. She has tempered him down when it comes to picking on me. For Jared, however, it seems like he’s only ramped up recently. During last month’s family dinner, he wouldn’t stop kicking me under the table. It drove me insane. I wanted to wind my own leg back and send it into his shin. His strange behavior is because of his divorce from his ex, Jessica, which was finalized a few months ago.

That had been a shocker. Jessica and Jared made it to seven family vacations before calling it quits. She had been nice enough but was always very standoffish and prickly, no matter how long she had known us.

Despite my behavior today, I don’t argue with Jared nearly as much as I did as a teenager. However, just seeing him fills me with an immediate sense of annoyance. I can’t quite pinpoint when Jared started to antagonize me. It must have been during

my later teen years when his snarky comments stung me the most.

Even after he got married, Jared always seemed to be around. Our parents had lived next door to each other for almost forty years, so it wasn't new. But his presence became more noticeable as I got older. On occasions when our families would get together or he just came over to visit with Tyler, he'd always point out that my shorts were too short or inquire whom I was going to meet up with, as if he was my father. These small comments would drive me insane, and I usually always had something snarky to say back.

"Why don't you tell us what the surprise is?" Jared turns to my mom, putting a kind smile on his face, like the poster boy he pretends to be.

"Eager, aren't we?" my mom replies with a smile, never having a bad thing to say about him.

He was at the top of his class all throughout high school and college, and Jared now owns a successful software development company. While it is arguably cool, I also find it insufferable. The guy who used to gang up with my brother and throw me fully clothed into the pool shouldn't get to be so perfect.

"You tell them, Beth," Maureen says excitedly, looking over at my mother.

I can't even begin to imagine what life would have been like if Tyler and Jared never joined each other playing outside that fateful day that's talked about at every major holiday. How that day turned into my parents inviting the Mitchells over for dinner, new to the neighborhood and looking to make friends. While I wasn't born for another twelve years, I've heard the story so many times, it's like I was there.

"Well, as you guys know, it's nearing time for our annual family trip," my mom says conspiratorially.

Looking over at Jared, he seems just as zoned out as I feel at my parents' words, every one of us seeming to have already known what this was about.

“And it’s our thirty-fifth one together,” my dad, Philip, chimes in, equally excited as my mom. Thirty-five years and never missed one. They started doing this not long after Jared and Tyler became friends. Even Tyler and Jared getting married and having their own kids hasn’t stopped it.

“Please tell us, I’m dying to know,” Tyler urges, exaggerating excitement for our parents’ benefit.

Jared snorts in amusement at my brother. I have always found it fascinating how those two haven’t faltered in their friendship for as long as I’ve known them. It would be almost admirable if they weren’t... them.

“Can we get a drumroll?” Jared’s dad, Doug, asks, prompting us all to beat on the table with our hands.

Jared, most definitely on purpose, makes sure to bring his hand down over mine a few times as he’s drumming on the table, even when I try to move it. It’s utterly childish and irritating, which are two words that I would use to describe Jared in general.

There’s a pause as my mom excitedly looks around the table.

“We’re going skiing,” she blurts out, earning stares from Jared, Tyler, Maria, and me.

CONTINUE READING JARED AND MONICA’S STORY