



*Rude*  
**BOSS**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**TINA MARTIN**

# RUDE BOSS

DePaul & Company, Book 1



TINA MARTIN

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*Dedicated to the readers. You all are the best.*

*Rude*  
**BOSS**

# Chapter 1

Quintessa



I seriously need this.

Need it so bad, I'm trembling for it. I've been without it for so long, I wouldn't know how to act if I got it. It's been a long time coming.

A long time.

But how would it feel if I got it? Will I like it? Regret it? Crave it? Maybe I'll grow tired of it...

I bite my lip and cross my legs, anxiety taking over my body as I stare down at the shiny red heels I chose to wear, thinking I should've been more conservative and gone with black flats. What was I thinking? Red may send the wrong signal. Or am I overthinking this? Yeah, I'm definitely overthinking.

I shouldn't be this nervous, but I am. That's what I get for waiting so long. Now, I don't remember how to do anything. Should I be indirect or forthright with what I want? Or maybe I should play it cool. That's it. I'll be laid back about it. They don't like it when women are aggressive these days, do they?

No. They don't.

I take a breath. "Okay, Quintessa. You got this," I tell myself. "There's nothing to it. Just get in there and do what needs to be done."

I have to do this. I feel like it's my last chance, in a way. I've been so down and out lately. Surely this will lift my spirits because I'm seriously in a bad way. I'm the female version of the man TLC described in the song *No Scrubs*. I guess that's why I can't get *no love*, but hey, at least I got a car.

I glance at my watch. What's taking so long? I'm only growing more anxious sitting in this room, lounging on a black velvet sofa on the first floor of the DePaul building. I place the folder that's holding my resume on the table next to a stack of *Essence* magazines. The interview was *supposed* to start at 8:30. It's now 8:52, and I got here at 8:15. What's the point of being punctual if the interviewer won't hold up their end of the bargain? It's not like this is a doctor's appointment where they put you back in a patient room and show up whenever they want – this is an interview. And at a place like DePaul & Company – with its staunch reputation for orderliness and punctuality, I would've expected things to run a lot more smoothly.

I release a slow breath like I'm trying to calm my nerves, but at this point, anxiety is turning into annoyance. I could've been done with this interview by now if I wasn't sitting alone in a room with a retro couch. I uncross my legs, stand up and pace the room while intermittently glancing at my watch. I declined the receptionist's offer to prepare a cup of coffee for me after she'd shown me into this room, but since it looks like I'll be here a while, I decide to go ahead and prepare a cup for myself. I take a sip. The hot beverage is enough to relax my nerves temporarily, and so I immediately go for another sip. The door swings open and I hear a woman say, "What are you doing in here?"

It almost sounded like she yelled it.

It shook me – scared me so much, I spilled coffee on my white blouse. Pulling the fabric from my chest to avoid burning myself, I say, "The receptionist told me to wait here for the interview."

I hurry near the sink to grab a few napkins, attempting to repair my coffee-stained blouse, but there is no repairing to it. It's ruined. I can't believe this!

I toss the napkins in the trash and take my resume folder from the table. It's official. I'm a living representation for Monday mornings.

The full-figured black woman, who's wearing a black skirt suit and high heels, swings the hair of her long, blonde wig, says, "You were supposed to be upstairs a half-hour ago."

"What? That's not what I was told. The receptionist told me to wait here. I got here early, and I've just been sitting here, wasting away, waiting to be called for an interview."

"Yeah, well, let's hope that's a good enough explanation for Mr. DePaul. He doesn't tolerate tardiness from anyone, so don't get offended if he dismisses the interview altogether. That's just the way it is."

I almost choke. None of this is my fault. And why is she implying that Mr. DePaul, himself, is the person doing the interviewing? Or maybe I didn't hear her correctly.

I say, "Just for clarification, did you say, Mr. DePaul, as in *the* Mr. DePaul?"

"Yep."

"I'm not interviewing with the CEO, am I?" I ask, stepping on the elevator with her. She presses the button for the twelfth floor.

"You are."

"I can't be!" I say, in full panic mode. "What in the...is this standard practice around here?"

"No, it's not, but Mr. DePaul specifically requested to interview you. Surprised me, too. He hasn't interviewed anyone in years."

"But, but—look at my blouse. What kind of first impression is this going to make?"

The woman grins. "Oh, please. If I were you, I'd be more concerned that I was late than with what's on my blouse."

We exit the elevator. I say, "But I wasn't late. I told you that."



I find it a struggle to keep up with her in these five-inch heels. I haven't worn heels in years. My toes are squished together, my blouse is messed up and now, I'm supposedly *late* at no fault of my own. Could this morning get any worse?

"By the way, I'm Shanice Davison, Mr. DePaul's executive assistant." She taps on a glass door. It's a conference room. I can see Mr. DePaul sitting at the end of a long conference room table. She throws up a hand, and he waves her – *us* – inside. Shanice instructs me to sit at the opposite end of the table. There must be at least twenty chairs – ten on each side – putting distance between us, which is fine by me. From this far away, there's a good chance he won't see my stained shirt.

Shanice says, "Mr. DePaul, this is Ms. Quintessa Bailey. She's interviewing for the...um...accounting associate position."

Shanice sounds nervous, and she *knows* the man. If she's this nervous, what am I to expect?

Mr. DePaul rolls up the sleeves of his white shirt, looking at a watch that probably costs more than my whole life. And my mama's life. And my mama's, *mama's* life.

"Thank you, Ms. Davison," he says in an abyss-deep tone that has me trembling slightly, as if caught off guard by a rumble of thunder on a day with no forecasted storms.

*He has manners. That's a shocker.*

Before now, I'd never met Mr. DePaul, but I've heard things. Women like him because he's smart, wealthy and handsome. Dresses well, like he has a personal tailor. He probably does. He's your typical I-made-it-to-the-top-now-bow-down-to-me CEO who wants everything done his way. He's aggressive. Dismissive. A formidable, autocratic leader. His wealth makes him clueless about the plight of common people like myself.

"You're welcome, sir," Shanice says. She flashes a wry smile before she leaves the room. When the door closes, I'm more unnerved than I was when I first learned it would be Mr. DePaul doing the interviewing. It's just me and him. Shanice

has left me alone with the wolf – the pack leader – the black man in charge of this impressive accounting firm.

In his presence, I feel like I felt the first day my parents dropped me off for kindergarten – abandoned and clueless. I didn't know how it was going to go. I just knew I was some place strange. That's where I am now – a place that's foreign to me – a place my gut tells me I don't want to be.

But a sista needs a job. What choice do I have? And, everything I've learned about him is hearsay. The rumors may not be true.

Mr. DePaul doesn't say a word. He glances up at me and carries his dark eyes back to his laptop screen.

*O-kay...this is awkward...*

What am I to do? Just sit here? Mr. DePaul ain't paying me no attention. It's like I'm not even here. Was there some kind of mix-up and he thinks I'm here for something else other than a job interview? That can't be the case. Shanice just told him I was here for the accounting associate position, so this has to be legit. I just wonder why he's avoiding me.

“Hello,” I say to break through the barrier of coldness in the room that has us icebergs apart – his fault.

His brows furrow at my greeting, but he's still more attentive to what he's doing on the computer, like he didn't hear me at all. It has me questioning whether I said anything. Did I say hello aloud? I thought I did.

I'm completely losing it.

That's the power this man wields. I knew that already – I just never expected I'd be so close to him to be influenced by the overwhelming potency of his demeanor.

I say, “Um, excuse me, Mr. DePaul, I'm here for the—”

“Be quiet,” he says evenly, his fingers moving across the keyboard like a skilled typist.

I snap my head back. “Excuse me?”

Who is he to tell me to be quiet? He's the CEO and all, but my own daddy doesn't tell me to *be quiet*. He's got the game twisted.

He glares at me from across the table – eyes focused on me like lasers, regarding me with cruel disparagement, like I ate the last donut or something. He clears his voice and reiterates, “I said be quiet.”

Now, *I'm* the one frowning. The utter disrespect is appalling, especially for a man so handsome (and yes, I can still appreciate how handsome he is, even though he's grossly disrespectful.)

Calmly, I ask, “Is this typically the way you talk to people because—”?

“Shh,” he darts out in his attempt to quiet me, fingers still moving across the keyboard.

I'm sitting here stewing. I already felt like I was having hot flashes when I learned he'd be the person interviewing me. Now, I feel like I'm about to incinerate this leather chair. This man done got me hot, and not in a good way. I'm at his mercy. He doesn't need a job – *I* do. Still, I would like nothing more than to give him a piece of my mind and leave with my dignity intact.

*You need this job, Quintessa. You already know how this dude operates. Don't let anything he says or does surprise you. If you do, your chance of securing a job here is out the window.*

After a few deep breaths, I get myself together, thinking about all the things I could do if I get this job. I could move out of Ella's apartment finally and get a place. I'm sure my best friend would love her apartment back. I could pay bills (oh, there's a thought) and live like a normal human being. That's all I want. Normalcy. I don't need a boatload of money. Shoot, at this point, I'd be willing to give up benefits. I just need a steady paycheck and work – something to fill my day-to-day so I don't have the time to sit around thinking about all the different ways my life could've turned out.

I haven't been on an interview in five years because my last job lasted about that long – four and a half years to be exact. It wasn't my fault that I was laid off. And four months before being laid off, me and my team were hit with furrows – a cut in pay – that would supposedly prevent anyone from getting laid off. Can you imagine – getting paid less money to do the same amount of work, and after all of that, still getting a pink slip?

Now, I'm starting from zero. Again. I don't know how to properly do this, and I thought for sure I'd be meeting with the person who's the head of the accounting department – not the CEO of the company – the *rude* boss. All that interview role-playing I did with Ella last night wasn't enough to prepare me to deal with this. With *him*. But, I'm here now. I have to do something.

I clear my throat and look across the table at him. Studying him. He's more than attractive. He's dreamy. If he hadn't opened his mouth and spewed out such ugly words, he *would* be a dream. He's a fine black man. His skin is chocolate-toned, smooth and rich. It's giving delectable, I-want-to-savor-you vibes. His sable-black hair is cut close and edged. Beard trimmed and groomed like he just left the barber this morning. His lips – you'd think the beautiful set he possesses would be the focal point of his face, but it's not. It's his eyes. His eyes are deep-dark. Abyss dark. Void of emotion...dark. No decent human being lurks behind them. No kind-hearted soul. Just a ruthless businessman with no regard for anyone but himself.

Typical.

He's dressed in a perfectly tailored suit. I'm sure it's probably Christian Dior, Alexander McQueen or Ferragamo – something along those lines. For him, wearing famous designer fashion ain't a thing. Meanwhile, I have to borrow clothes from my friend just to have something decent to wear to a job interview. Everybody can't have their lives as together as some people.

Mr. DePaul's cologne fills the room, but not more than his cantankerous energy. He has me on pins and needles. People in high positions have always made me feel less than, but he's

got me feeling wholly insignificant and irrelevant. I'm a goldfish trying to swim with the sharks, sitting here looking like a fool with coffee on my blouse.

I should leave. The moment I think I'm ready to, he closes his laptop with both hands and does so slowly, as if one of those large hands wasn't enough to fold it closed. He looks up at me and says evenly, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't cancel this interview."

"Why are you thinking about canceling it?"

"You arrived late," he says, glaring, yet he looks so poised and relaxed, like this kind of behavior is a part of who he is. I can't even tell if he's breathing, but he must be since he's still alive and all. Just my luck...

*Quintessa, you need this job.*

"I wasn't late, Mr. DePaul. My interview was scheduled for 8:30. I arrived at 8:15 and your receptionist showed me to a waiting room downstairs where I sat the rest of the time, waiting for someone to come get me. She must've forgotten to let your assistant know."

He frowns, picks up a retractable pen and clicks it repeatedly. A bulge in his jaw spasms. He looks away from me for a second, then leans back in his chair. I don't know what to do at this point. I'm a prisoner in here. Do I just sit here and watch this man throw a weird, silent man-tantrum, or should I take my folder and slide on out of here?

*Quintessa, you need this job.*

Right. A job. My voice of reason is telling me to stay put, so I sit here and listen as he clicks that awful pen – the sound is more aggravating than a ticking clock. After another few minutes of this, he sits straight-up again and says, "See how annoying that is—*waiting* for someone."

*Oh, so that's what he was doing – teaching me a lesson.*

I restate, "It wasn't my fault."

"More excuses. Is that the kind of employee you're going to be, Ms. Bailey? If so, I can have Ms. Davison escort you back

downstairs and out of those revolving doors as quickly as you came through them.”

Boy, oh boy, he knows how to get under a person’s skin. If I didn’t need this job, I wouldn’t need Shanice or anybody else to show me the way out of here. I’m almost ready to spring up from this chair and make a run for it. Then I think about how broke I am. I drove my Mitsubishi Mirage over here on fumes. I have thirteen dollars and some change in my bank account. The money I get in unemployment goes to buying food and giving Ella something on the bills, even though she says I don’t have to give her anything. I just don’t feel right not offering her something when I’m a grown woman who’s supposed to stand on her own two feet. And now this prick is interfering with my chance at making twenty-five dollars an hour.

“Well?” he asks, his thick brows raised.

“No, that’s not the kind of employee I’m going to be. I’m always on time, just like I was on time today, but—” I digress. He wants to blame me for this. Fine. Whatever.

“But what?” he asks, raising his tone.

“Nothing,” I respond.

He stands up – all six feet-four inches of him. Maybe five. He’s tall. Impressively so. I’m waiting for him to tell me to leave, but instead he asks, “Would you like some water?”

*Why would you offer me water after putting me through the wringer? Nah, I don’t want your stuck-up water. I most surely do not!*

I say, “No, thanks. I’m good.”

He walks over to a table in the corner of the room, picks up two bottles of water and saunters over to me. He sets a bottle on the table next to my folder. *Didn’t I just tell this fool I didn’t want any water?*

“Um, I—” I was going to tell him again, but with a man like Essex DePaul, the less you say, the less he has to hold against you.

*Yikes...*

He extends his hand to shake mine.

Nothing in me wants to shake this jerk's hand. It's one thing to be mean and evil and stand by that, but people who touted their evilness but tried to pretend they were nice – that's some real psychopathic behavior.

I accept his hand and try to at least impress him with a handshake since I have yet to impress him with anything else. I attempt to lock his hand in a firm squeeze, but he beat me to it. Besides, I couldn't squeeze his hands if I wanted to. It's like trying to shake hands with a tennis racket – not the handle – the actual part that hits the ball.

He releases my hand, pulls out the chair adjacent to mine and makes himself comfortable, crossing his legs. He opens the water bottle and takes a long swig. After returning the bottle to the table, he says, "You should never shake anyone's hand while you're sitting."

*Great. More reprimands...*

I sigh. Like my car that's sitting in the parking lot on E, this interview ain't going nowhere. My high hopes have slowly filtered down the drain. I'm already thinking about the other companies I've applied to.

Just to entertain his constant degradation of me since I've been in his presence, I ask, "What's wrong with shaking somebody's hand while I'm sitting?"

"It's impolite."

*You're impolite!*

"I've never heard of that before," I tell him. "I'll keep that in mind."

*For my next interview.*

He turns up the bottle again, staring at me while he quenches his thirst. I catch a glimpse of his watch – a white gold, Audemars Piguet – and his well-manicured fingernails. I smell his sweet cologne. It's more potent since he's sitting closer to me.

I look away from him and glance at my watch. It's not as elegant as his, but it gives me the time just the same. It's 9:37, and I've accomplished nothing. I've decided that this interview is a waste. You live and you learn, and I've learned that every opportunity isn't for everybody. This one can't be for me. It can't be. It's time for me to leave.

I reach for my folder and say, "You know what...I don't think—"

"What happened to your blouse?" he queries.

I look down at my blouse. It's actually Ella's blouse. I don't own clothes this nice. My last job required that I wore navy blue uniforms. I rarely shopped for clothes. My wardrobe consists of many pairs of black leggings and old jogging pants from years ago.

Mr. DePaul grins and says, "Looks like the shirt of a toddler after her chocolate ice cream fell out of a ridiculous cone." He releases a semblance of a laugh and continues, "I never understood why people eat ice cream from a cone. It's messy, and it makes them look silly."

I say, "It wasn't ice cream—"

"I didn't say it was ice cream. I said it *looks* like ice cream."

"If you must know, I spilled coffee on myself while waiting for this *ridiculous* interview."

I stand, take my folder, and say, "I don't think I'm right for this position, so I'm going to leave."

"Ms. Bailey—"

"And I don't need Shanice to show me out. Trust me. I'll find a way, even if I have to jump from a window."

"Ms. Bailey."

"What?" I snap.

"Do you always run when you're challenged, because if so, there isn't a firm in all of Florida that will hire you?"

"You don't know that."



“I do. I’m very well connected. Now, instead of running, why don’t you stand your ground and tell me why you’re the perfect candidate for this position?”

“I’d rather not. You didn’t like me from the moment I walked through that door, so I know you’re not interested in anything I have to say.”

“Not true.”

“It *is* true. You literally told me to *be quiet*. Then you made me wait as if to prove a point when *I* didn’t get here late. So you can click your lil’ stupid pen all you want. And if I want to shake somebody’s hand sitting down, that’s what I’ll do. I’m out of here,” I say and storm off toward the door. I push it. The door doesn’t budge. I push and push and push and ram it some more. It still doesn’t open.

He says, “You have to pull it.”

I roll my eyes, embarrassed and angry at the same time. I snatch the door open and, as I step out into the hallway, the right heel of my shoe breaks.

*You have got to be kidding me!*

And I thought I was embarrassed before. I’m sure this is all bonus entertainment for him – something to tell his pretentious friends while they sit around smoking Cubans and overindulging in expensive brown liquor. I’ve got to get out of here before I make a complete fool of myself, or have I done that already?

I take off my shoes and walk barefoot toward the elevator bay.

“Is your interview over already?” Shanice asks with a look of surprise on her face.

I say, “It was over before it started. This was nothing but a waste of time. I can’t believe I came here for this.”

Shanice catches up to me by the elevator. “He’s really not bad once you get to know him.”

“Girl, y’all can help yourself with that. This is *not* the kind of environment I want to work in. He’s impossible. And so

judgmental. He didn't like me from the moment you introduced me, but it's cool. I'm out. Thanks for bringing me up here. I just wish it wasn't such a huge waste of time for everyone."

I jump on the elevator, slap the ground floor button and close my eyes. This morning was the worst. This has got to rank high on the list of the worst interviews ever. And none of it was my fault.

Though I remain jobless, I still leave this place hopeful for what's next. I won't give up. When one revolving door closes, another one spins open, right? My open door is out here somewhere and if all goes well, it won't be at a place with a boss as mean as Essex DePaul.

# Chapter 2

Essex



I leave the conference room with my mind spinning, thoroughly displeased with myself, met by Ms. Davison's confused gaze. I don't say a word to her – just beeline it to my office where I close the door and press the button that lowers the blinds. I can't believe how poorly things went, but all I can attest to are the memories – bad memories. The hurt. The pain. Being close to Quintessa Bailey again has me thinking about how my life used to be. I wasn't always a successful CEO. The old me wasn't remotely as confident as the new me. Back then, I was a nobody.

Shanice taps on the door, pokes her head inside, and asks, "Can I get you anything, Mr. DePaul?"

What she really wants to know is why the interview ended so abruptly, but I won't give her the satisfaction of an answer. I say, "Yes. Coffee."

"Sure thing.

I lean back in the chair with my hands threaded behind my head. I know I won't be productive today because of what I've done. You couldn't tell from the interview, but I want Quintessa to work here. I hired a headhunter to find her and submit a resume to them so they could, in turn, submit it to DePaul & Company on her behalf. I knew she had the skills to do the job, and I wanted her close to me – wanted to know all about her life. So, I handpicked her resume for this position, then gave the recruiter the green light to contact her and

finally, after all the pieces worked together harmoniously, she was here today for her interview. But I messed it up because the anger took over. The resentment. The *new* me wouldn't let the old me – the more compassionate man – treat her with kindness. Why? Because she hurt me – hurt me to my core. I've harbored a grudge against the girl for the longest and today, I realize that hurt and pain is still there, but so is the attraction. Maybe it's not such a good idea that we work together.

I've known Quintessa Bailey since we were classmates. When I was fourteen, my parents moved us from Detroit, Michigan to Tallahassee, Florida. I was a freshman in high school at the time – the new fat kid with no friends, trying to get along with a whole new set of people after the last set despised me, thinking it would be different. Not only was I overweight, but I had a massive birthmark that extended across nearly half of my face. No one wanted to be my friend back in Detroit and no one wanted to be my friend in Florida. I was laughed at, teased constantly, and called names I dare not repeat. People would walk by me and say 'it's not Halloween yet' or they'd call out my name to get my attention, then hurry up and turn away from me as if I was *that* repulsive. I was all set to drop out and throw in the towel because there was no place for me. But my father talked me out of it. He encouraged me to keep going. Said he didn't want me to be a high school dropout like he was. He wanted me to make something of myself. Said people were going to talk about you, regardless. So, my life became someone else's because I wasn't living for myself. I was existing to make him happy – to make my parents proud of me and that's what kept me going for a while.

Turns out, it was the best decision of my life because a few days later, I met Quintessa, or shall I say she met me? I was in the cafeteria, walking with my tray, looking for somewhere to sit, when she waved me over to her table. I turned around to make sure she wasn't talking to someone else. There was no one there. She was talking to me. She had just finished eating, so she stood up from her chair so I could sit while she sat on the floor beside me. I was elated. Someone wanted me around. She introduced herself as *Quin* and proceeded to acquaint me

with all of her friends. Since that day, we were inseparable – ended up being the best of friends, but I wasn't as close with her friends as I was with her. Didn't want to be. She's all I needed. All I wanted. My *Tessie*. That's the nickname I gave her. Tessie. She was always there for me. She helped me with my homework. To this day I remember how good she was at math and biology – so good it impressed me and her teachers. There was nothing Quintessa Bailey couldn't do. She won awards, ran track and was on the swim team. She was an all-around good girl. A girl I wanted.

Everything was all good until we graduated from high school. That's when we lost touch. She got accepted at Florida State University. I got in at the University of Florida. I knew the distance would prove a challenge to our friendship, but I didn't think I'd lose her altogether.

That's exactly what ended up happening.

She took her studies seriously – so serious that on holiday breaks, she couldn't take the time to come home to visit as I'd always done. Every holiday or spring break, I hoped to see her. Don't get me wrong, I worked hard, too, but I still took the time to go home and visit. I visited *her* parents, too, hoping they'd tell me when she was coming home. She never did.

Since I couldn't be with the woman I wanted, I used my energy to focus on school until I walked across the stage with a Bachelor's in Analytics and Accounting. I worked for a firm for a while, but my ultimate goal was to start my own company. The problem was, I didn't have the confidence to do it. I felt good about my abilities, but not about myself, my appearance and weight. So, I hit the gym hard, lost all those extra pounds and toned up. And then the time came to address the hideous birthmark on my face.

On a whim, I decided to have plastic surgery to finally give myself the gift of a normal appearance. The procedure was more successful than I could have ever imagined. I didn't recognize myself afterward – I was a whole new man with a new face. I was a man who women noticed for the first time. I went from having no prospects to so many, I didn't know what

to do with them all. I went out, had fun, and dated for the first time in my life. I was the man.

But I wasn't happy. I didn't want a woman to want me because, post-surgery, I was a *heartthrob*. I wanted a woman who *saw* me before the weight loss and new face.

I wanted Quintessa.

To have any chance of getting her, I knew I still had work to do. I had to find the confidence to match my new face, so I studied how powerful men in business behaved. I went to seminars where I learned how to master public speaking. For years I did this until I became a man who people could respect. And to put the icing on the cake, I legally changed my name from Stewart Dennis, Jr. to Essex DePaul before starting DePaul & Company at twenty-six years old. The name change wasn't well-received by my folks, but when I explained to them it was something I needed to do for the vision I saw for myself – for my life – they eventually came around. Besides, they'd seen all the other changes I'd made. They knew I was serious about this new direction in my life.

Now, at thirty-four, I run a million-dollar accounting firm. I have two hundred employees and have more clients than I ever thought I would, and I'm talking high-level companies and industries in the eastern United States. My life is sweet. The only thing I'm missing is a woman to complete it all – to inundate my world with hers, give me children and the life I crave.

Shanice taps on the door again, then enters, setting the coffee cup on my desk.

I tell her, "Hold my calls for the rest of the day."

"Sir, you realize you have a conference call scheduled with Walbridge Industries at noon."

"Reschedule it for me, please."

"But you never reschedule potential clients, sir, especially Walbridge. You've been trying to secure that business for a while."

I massage the tense muscles in my neck and say, “I said reschedule it!”

“Yes, sir. Will do. Do you have a particular date in mind?”

“Whatever date is good with them.”

“Got it. Also, I was curious about the interview. Is everything all right?”

“Yes. *Peachy*. You can go now.”

When she leaves, I rub my forehead and replay the short time I spent in the conference room with Quintessa. I can still hear the mellifluous tone of her voice flowing through me like waves. She didn’t recognize me. I suppose that worked in my favor. She doesn’t need to know who I am just yet, but now I have some fences to mend because she *will* work here. Working for my company will give her time to get used to my new persona. I’ll never be the fat, ugly kid from high school again. I’m the complete package. I have money, I have the looks, the body, the bad boy persona – I’m what *they* want.

I drink coffee and pick up the pen, clicking it open and closed again, picturing her oval-shaped face in my mind. She looks so different than she did back then. She’s matured into a gorgeous woman – a woman whose beauty strikes anyone who has the pleasure of looking at her – reminds me of the actress, Christina Milian. Is it her smooth, exotic chocolate brown skin complexion that has me reeling? Or perhaps those heart-shaped, red-gloss-covered seductive lips? Her hair is longer – that I can tell even though she had her strands gathered up in a top bun or whatever you call the knot women wear at the top of their heads. I can imagine her naturally curly strands framing her face. She’s taller, too, but not by much. It almost looks like she had a late growth spurt. I could see her true height after she slid out of her shoes – about five feet four. Her alluring eyes are a magnetic brown, just as I remember. They caught my eyes constantly, but I fought the urge to stare into them. Overall, Quintessa has a beautiful face that any man would appreciate. I know she’s not married – she wasn’t wearing a ring – but I wonder if there’s a boyfriend in the

picture. I sure hope not. No man will appreciate her the way I do. I know who she really is. I know her heart.

And she has no idea I'm the loser she befriended back in high school.

Stewart Dennis.

I pick up Quintessa's resume and study it, looking at the phone number and address she provided. She doesn't live far from here – only a few miles. I take a look at her previous jobs. The longest position she's held was at Youngkin CPA Firm – she was there right after graduating from college up until she was about thirty. There are two other jobs after that and now she's unemployed.

I glance at the interpersonal skills she has listed:

*Ability to work well under pressure.*

I sneer. That remains to be seen. If she couldn't handle the interview, how can she handle anything else?

*Analytical skills.*

That I can see. She was always good with math and finding creative ways to solve problems.

*Detail-oriented.*

I doubt most people know what this means. She also states that she's good at multitasking, communication skills and customer service – all of which the accounting associate position requires.

I place the resume on my desk again. Aside from what she's typed, I want to know how her life is. What has she been up to since being out of work? How is she living? Is she happy? How has life treated her all these years? I suppose if I would've handled the interview with more tact, I would've learned the answers to those questions.

And therein lies my problem. *Essex DePaul* has no tact, and I like that about my new self. I've grown to love the man I've become, but surely, it'll be a roadblock to my ultimate goal of landing my dream girl. It's so difficult to change once you've tasted power. Once you have the formula for success. I surely



would've never gotten here by being Stewart Dennis, so she'll just have to learn to take me how I am. Hopefully, that'll be easier for her after we've spent some time together.

# Chapter 3

Quintessa



After putting ten dollars' worth of gas in the tank, I go back home defeated. Ella's all optimistic, greeting me at the front door like she's ready to celebrate. All she's missing is a bottle of champagne. Unfortunately, it ain't that kind of party. The deflated expression on my face, and the broken heel on the shoe I'm holding, told her that *real* quick.

“Oh, no, Quin. Look at your blouse.”

“And the shoe,” I say, holding up the one with the broken heel. “First of all, let me say, do you know how disgusting it is to pump gas barefoot?”

“My goodness, girl. What happened? You look like you got chased by a wild animal.”

“That's precisely what happened,” I say. “Except this wild animal walks upright and had on a five-thousand-dollar suit.”

Ella rips out a laugh while I sit on the sofa, completely defeated.

Sitting on the opposite end of the sofa, she says, “I'm sorry for laughing. You look like you had a hard time.”

“That's an understatement.”

“So, dish—I want to know everything.”

I inhale deeply, exhale sharply and ignore my rumbling stomach when I reply, “The so-called interview was a nightmare. When I got there, the receptionist shows me to a

waiting room that looks like a pimp lounge—I mean there were suede couches up in there and all—and I just sat there for nearly a half hour. I was supposed to have already started the interview. I had no idea what the hold-up was. So, I thought I'd grab some coffee...spilled *that* on myself when Mr. DePaul's executive assistant scared the crap out of me when she barged into the room and asked me why I was in there. She proceeded to tell me I was late and how Mr. DePaul doesn't tolerate tardiness."

"But you weren't late," Ella says.

"That's what I told her. I'd been there all along. So she takes me to a conference room on the twelfth floor and guess who's sitting in there waiting to interview me?"

"Who?"

"Essex DePaul."

Ella gasps and throws a hand over her heart. "No."

"Yes. Why would the CEO of the company be interviewing me? Don't they have bigger and better things to do? And you wouldn't believe how much of a jerk this dude is, Ella. When I tell you he made me feel so small...he scolded me for being late and it wasn't my fault! I was so mad."

"He sounds like a real butt wipe."

"Oh, but it gets worse. So, he's on his laptop when I enter the conference room. It's super quiet in there besides the noise from him typing on the keyboard. Other than that, he's not saying a word. He didn't introduce himself or nothing. He just sat there. I tried to say something so I wasn't just sitting there looking stupid, and he had the nerve, the sheer *gall*, to tell me to be quiet."

Ella's dark blue eyes nearly bulged out of her head. "Oh, no he didn't."

"Yes, he did."

"Girl, I would've got up then and there."

"Trust me, I thought about it, but I stayed because I really wanted the job. Now that I've had time to think about it, I

realize I probably shouldn't have. It just got weirder from there. Mr. DePaul commented about the stain on my blouse—like straight up comparing me to a toddler who didn't know how to eat ice cream. Then this man offered me water. I don't accept water from evil people.”

Ella laughs. “You should've put that on your resume. No, better yet, on a T-shirt.”

“Shut up, Ella,” I say tickled. “Anyway, I declined and he gave me some anyway, like he didn't hear me when I said no. The whole experience was a nightmare. I couldn't take it anymore. I had to get out of there. I picked up my resume and stomped out of there so hard, I cracked the heel on my favorite red shoes. And just to think I was so optimistic about the job. Ugh...I don't know what I was thinking.”

“You were thinking you'd be dealing with some professional people when obviously you were not. But this ain't the end, girl. You still got the interview with Dominion tomorrow, right?”

“No, it's on Wednesday and I hope it goes better than this one did. It's not even noon yet, and I'm mentally and physically exhausted.”

“Girl, just go relax for the rest of the day.”

I sigh. “I'm just so bummed out about it. It's been a bad past few months for me—you know that—and I just thought I'd finally found something I would enjoy. And it pays more than Dominion, too. I tried...I *really* tried, Ella. I know you're ready to have your apartment back to yourself.”

“Girl, please. Listen to me. I'm in no hurry. I told you when you first moved in that you can stay here for as long as you needed to. You're not bothering me. If the tables were turned and I needed a place to stay, I know you'd be there for me, too, so don't sweat it.”

“Thanks, El.”

“You're welcome.” She stands. Stretches. “I have to get back to my desk before my boss instant messages me just to

see if I'm at my computer. You know how extra clingy management gets when they have people working remotely."

"Yeah. You go handle that. I'm going to go see if I can find my pride again."

"Aw, Quin. You're making me sad," she says, crestfallen with her bottom lip hanging.

"It's all good. Go. I don't want you to get in trouble."

I head to my bedroom, take off the coffee-stained blouse and fall across the bed. This is where I'll be for the rest of the day – sleeping off what this day has done to my nerves, hoping tomorrow's interview at Dominion will go a lot better.

# Chapter 4

Essex



My new and improved *fabulous* life has become nothing but one meeting after another. Day in and day out it's what I do. Meetings upon meetings. When you make it to the top, it's to be expected, I suppose. I remember a rapper saying it was lonely at the top. Outside of all these meetings, it is. I'm living proof of that. Perhaps it's the fact that most of my clients are multi-million-dollar corporations, and I cater my time to their every need. Yeah, that could have something to do with it.

This particular meeting is one of the more important ones – a one-on-one with Greta Wilburn, who heads up individual accounting. Individual accounting is how I started this business. The accounts only grew bigger from there, but if it wasn't for the individual approach, DePaul & Company would've been nothing but a thought. I may not have consistent meetings with the other department heads, but this one with Mrs. Wilburn is a must.

As we're wrapping up, she asks, "Oh, by the way, Mr. DePaul, how'd the interview go yesterday?"

That interview...

Quintessa flashes in my mind. I haven't decided how I would approach her just yet to get her back in this office, but I don't want to talk to Mrs. Wilburn about it. If I wanted her to know how the interview went, I would've told her in advance of the meeting. I don't know why some people choose to test me as if they'll get some special treatment. Mrs. Wilburn has

worked here long enough to know me. She should know better.

I respond, “It went.”

“Then when is she starting? I need that position filled asap. My team is swamped, and here we are smack dab in the middle of tax season.”

Mrs. Wilburn is about as old as my mother. I feel sorry for the lady for having to still work so hard at her age, but her husband is on disability and somebody’s got to pay the mortgage. I try my best to be as gentle as possible with her, but I need things done a certain way around here. One thing always holds true – if somebody can’t do the job right, I can always find someone who can.

I glance up at her and say, “You don’t think I’m aware of that, Mrs. Wilburn? What you need to do is access your current team’s productivity. That girl with the purple hair is a borderline chain-smoker, and the African is at the café more than she’s at her desk.”

Mrs. Wilburn gasps and shakes her head.

“You disagree,” I ask, challenging her to dispute it when I’m already knowing I’m right.

“You know what...the way you speak of them—my team—is ill-suited for an office environment and a man with your position, for that matter. The girl with the purple hair—her name is Mauve. And the *African*, as you so eloquently put it, her name is Zahara, who’s my most productive team member, by the way.”

“Perhaps it’s all those frappés she sucks down. Whatever the case, they all—every last one of them—push the limits of the dress code. How about you remind them that they come here to work, not to express their substandard sense of fashion? If they don’t want to work or dress appropriately, they can leave.”

She looks at me like I’m speaking another language – face all wrinkled, expressing her disapproval through nonverbal communication. If the old bat wasn’t so good at her job, I’d

been kicked her to the curb, but she's been with me for so long, I wouldn't want anyone else in that position.

She says, "I'm already short-staffed and you think I'm going to open my mouth and say something like that to my people?"

I shoot her a glare. "*Your* people? Need I remind you, Mrs. Wilburn, that you, and those under you, work for me?"

"I understand that, Mr. DePaul, but you're being unreasonable. The team—"

"Stop wasting your time and mine. Go *manage* your team, Mrs. Wilburn. You'll have additional help starting this week, and I don't want to hear anything else about it."

She glares at me, gathers her documents and her laptop, then goes on about her business.

That's precisely what I do for the rest of the day – go about my business, which entails a working lunch and then another meeting at 2:00 p.m. When it's closing time, and that's 5:30 around here, I'm at my desk staring at Quintessa's resume again like it's a picture of her. In many ways, it is. It's a snapshot of her life since she graduated from Florida State. In a way, it has led her right back to me. I have to get her back into this office.

Sending her an email would probably go over better than a phone call since my mouth usually gets me in trouble more than my fingers do. I draft an email to her, hit send and hope for the best.



It's a relief to be off work.

I trudge into Gregory's seeking a night to myself to unwind and clear my head. I'm here frequently. I'm a single man. I don't cook and I don't arrive home to a home-cooked meal unless I arrange one with my chef which I haven't done in



quite some time. Most days, I just prefer something like this. The place is sufficient enough for what I need.

Gregory's is an upscale bar and grill where executives and people of note from the surrounding cities gather. I've seen players from the Miami Heat in here. Football players come through. Kevin Hart was here just last week. He thought it was hilarious when Billy, one of the bartenders here, told him they didn't serve kid meals. Anyway, one burger costs a hundred bucks. Comes with fries. After the day I had, the burger I'm eating is accompanied by a side of Louis XIII cognac.

I take a sip and glance up at the group of women sitting at the opposite side of the bar. They're all looking this way, then smile and turn away, chatting with each other. Women are here constantly – not for the food and drinks – but for the men, looking for some unsuspecting wealthy guy to show them a good time, even if it's just for a night or two. I'm not a partaker. Never have been. I'm just here for food, but mostly for this drink.

“DePaul, how are you, my boy?” Billy says, returning my way after he's fulfilled all the drink orders around the bar. He's a chill guy – likes to run his mouth like bartenders usually do. I don't mind the company.

I say, “I'm good.” I take a sip of Cognac. “I may need another one of these bad boys, though.”

“Ooh—two drinks in one night? That's not like you. Must be a work thang.”

“Isn't it always?” I ask, but it's not this time. It's a woman *thang*.

“I hear you, man.”

The women's giggles erupt and catch the attention of the men at the bar. Billy turns around and looks at them. He looks back at me and says, “Looks like you got yourself a fan club over there.”

“There're plenty of other men here for them to look at. They're probably eyeing you up, Billy.”

“Don’t think so. These women are looking for the boss types with deep pockets. My pockets are so narrow, the little pieces of lint are looking for a new place to live.”

I smirk. “It ain’t that bad, is it?”

“Bruh, most of these old men up in here leave five-dollar tips and think they’re doing me a favor. This is an upscale bar. I’m supposed to make upscale tips.”

“That’s true.”

The women are loud and laughing again. I glance over at them. It’s becoming an annoyance at this point.

Billy says, “Shoot your shot, my man.”

“I don’t need to *shoot* anything. There’s nothing in here for me.”

“Obviously, there is. They’ve been sweating you since you sat down.”

I shake my head. “If I was broke, overweight and ugly, which one of those women over there would give me the time of day?”

Billy turns around, checks them out and says, “None of ‘em.”

“You’re correct, my friend. None of them.” I toss back the rest of the cognac. Billy refills my glass immediately. I say, “I used to be that guy once upon a time.”

“What guy?”

“The broke, overweight, ugly guy.”

“No way.”

“I have the pictures to prove it, but that’s the old me. Here’s the question of the year—why would I want any of these women up in here when I know they only want me for what I have?”

“You don’t know that, man. You’re making assumptions.”

“No, I’m not. I see these same women in here leaving with different men often. I’m not about to be one of them.”

“But they’re fine, though, man. You can’t deny that. So what if they’re interested because they know you’re loaded? Isn’t that the point of obtaining wealth? It affords you access to these extraordinary women who us regular men don’t have access to.”

I shake my head. “I’m curious. Why do you think they’re extraordinary?”

Billy grins. “What do you think? Their looks. Their body. These women have amazing bodies, man.”

I say, “A woman should have more to offer a man than her body, and a man shouldn’t be so shallow to want a woman because she has a pretty face and a nice body.”

Wiping the bar top, Billy says, “You’re right, you are, but unfortunately, that’s the way it is out here in these streets. Men make the money and women are expected to be exceptionally beautiful. It’s an exchange.”

“To each his own. I’m just saying I’m not feeding into the nonsense.”

Billy throws a black towel over his left shoulder. “This is interesting.”

“What is?”

“This conversation. You have it all, and you’re telling me you’re not going to hand pick the perfect woman for yourself. A woman to give you children—*beautiful* children.”

“I have one in mind already.”

“Ah...now it all makes sense. There *is* a woman.”

“And she’s not one of *them*. I handpicked her long before I ever made a dime. She was a friend to me when I had nothing. And when I say nothing, I mean *nothing*. We lost touch after high school and I’ve recently become acquainted with her again. The only thing is, she has no idea who I am.”

“Get out of here, man? How is that even possible?”

“Let’s just say I’m not the man I used to be.”

“Sounds to me like you got yourself into a mess.”

“If only you knew.”

I take my phone from the pocket of the suit jacket and check my email inbox to see if Quintessa has replied to the email I sent her before leaving the office. She hasn't, but I'm certain she'll get back to me at some point. If she doesn't, I'll just have to pay her a visit.



After leaving Gregory's, I arrive at ten thousand square feet of empty house. I bought the place eight years ago after two years of searching for the perfect waterfront home. I wouldn't settle for less than what I wanted because when you reach this status, you don't *settle* for anything. You get everything you want.

I enter the house through the garage. I swear sometimes I can hear my echo whenever I walk in. The slightest sound – me tossing keys to the counter – creates a noise that reminds me I'm the only one here. The house is fully furnished – a modern style, ten-bedroom, seven-bathroom, top-of-the-line beach home. I have a housekeeper who comes in twice a week to do a full cleaning, although much doesn't need to be done since I live here alone. I consider myself a tidy person – probably more than most men. My house is always neat and organized. There are no kids here to mess things up, although I dream of that often. I wouldn't mind stepping on Legos after my sons have built a tower, or watching my daughters play with dolls and little pink teacups. Most people – especially the ones I work with – would never think I wanted those things, but I think about them constantly. I want my children to carry my name – to grow up and be proud that their father built an empire for them.

I jog upstairs, undress and put on some workout clothes. I spend an hour in the gym lifting weights, mostly. It's a part of my stress relief program. It's how I keep my mind clear so I can be ready for tomorrow. While I'm bench-pressing a hundred and fifty pounds, all I think about is Quintessa.

There's so much I need to know about her. I want to know how her parents, Sylvie and Amos, are doing. I need to know how life has been treating her all these years. Back then, she was confident. Always knew what she wanted and what it took to get it. Yesterday, she was flustered and so...different. I shouldn't expect her to be the same person she was in high school, but since it's all I know, it came as a surprise that she let me get away with so much. Who is Quintessa Bailey these days?

After a shower, I check my phone again before bed. There's no correspondence from her, to my dismay. I've proactively saved her number in my phone under *Tessie* and had to make myself not send her a text message. I at least need to give her time to reply to my message before I go after her full force. That's playing fair, right?

# Chapter 5

Quintessa



I get up early on Wednesday morning after a sucky day yesterday. The interview on Monday had me bummed to the point that I didn't bother leaving the apartment. I stayed in bed most of the day alternating between sleeping and mindlessly watching TV. The experience of dealing with a jerk like Essex DePaul has left me questioning life. Like, why do people like *him* get so far ahead? It's like they're rewarded for their inappropriate behavior and meanwhile, us little people don't have two pennies to rub together. How's that fair? This guy has millions and I'm struggling, living at the mercy of my best friend. I did all the right things in life. I wasn't rebellious. I was nowhere near the partying type. I graduated from college and got a job. Should I have saved more money? Of course, but this is America – the land of the free and home of the broke where people live paycheck-to-paycheck and so far above their means that their money is spent before they earn it. The little money I saved over the years is what I've lived off of for the last five months and when that ran out, so did my luck.

But, I'm not going to wallow in this series of unfortunate events. It's so easy to do – to indulge in daily doses of misery when life isn't working out the way I envisioned. I've been there, done that so many times, I've lost count, but not today. Today is a new day, which means I have a new opportunity to start over and work toward my goals.

I breathe deeply and say, “You’re going to get this job today.”

I *will* get this job today. With a renewed sense of optimism, I take a long, relaxing shower. Ella donated another one of her blouses to me last night, a pink one this time. I paired it with a black skirt and four-inch shiny black wedges. I brush my hair in a ponytail, dab on some foundation, tame my unruly eyebrows and apply some mascara to my lashes. After I put on some pink lip gloss, you can’t tell me nothing. It’s amazing what a shower and a lil’ makeup can do for a woman’s self-esteem.

“You’re going to kill this interview, Quintessa,” I tell myself while staring in the mirror. “You got this. Just breathe and go get it. You have the skills. You *know* you have the skills, girl. There’s nothing to be nervous about.”

Yeah, I got this. DePaul & Company is not the only accounting firm in the world. Dominion is good. The pay is not as good, but hey, it’s a job. Besides, currently, I’m making zero dollars and no cents. Seventeen dollars an hour sounds real good right about now. It’s a way for me to finally get my own place.

I glance at the clock. It’s 7:35 a.m. The interview is scheduled for 10:00 a.m. I have plenty of time to relax beforehand. I grab my cell phone and go to the kitchen, slice a blueberry bagel, and take some cream cheese from the fridge.

Ella walks in and says, “Hey, girl. I see you’re feeling better. You look good.”

“Yeah, I am feeling so much better. Today is my day. I’m going up in there and getting this job.”

“That’s the spirit, Quin. My girl is back. Watch out world!”

I giggle at her. “Hey, do you want a bagel while I’m making one for myself?”

“No. I’m feeling more like oatmeal this morning,” she said, opening the cabinet where she keeps the oats.

Still standing at the counter, I take a bite of my bagel and pick up my phone, browsing through the endless sea of emails

from every single business, store or restaurant I've subscribed to. But there's an email that stands out, nestled within them all. It's from DePaul & Company. Instinctively, I wanted to delete it. I'm certain it's one of those random survey emails that asks stupid, post-interview questions. Whoever sent it is probably not aware that my interview never happened. Curiosity gets the best of me and instead of deleting the email, I click on it to find it's not what I thought it was. It's an actual email from Essex DePaul. Supposedly...

**To: Quintessa Bailey**

**From: Essex DePaul**

**Date: Tuesday, February 1, 2022 05:45:28 EST**

**Subject: Accounting Associate**

**I'm sitting at my desk staring at your resume. I need to talk to you as soon as possible about this position. You left prematurely on Monday. We didn't get to discuss any of your qualifications. At your earliest convenience, call me. My direct number is XXX-XXX-XXXX.**

**Regards,**

**Essex DePaul**

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“Um, Quin?”

Glancing up, I meet Ella's curious eyes. I was so engrossed and grossed out by this email, I didn't realize she was talking to me. I'm sure the look on my face has her concerned. It's one of disgust. This man is trying to ruin my day yet again.

I say, “El, you're not going to believe this.”

“What's wrong?”

“This man done sent me an email requesting I call him at my earliest convenience to discuss my qualifications.”

“Who?”

“Essex DePaul! He must be smoking that good stuff if he thinks I'm going to step a foot back up in that building. Ain't no way.”

“Wait a minute, don't rule it out,” Ella says, playing devil's advocate. “He may have had a change of heart.”



“I don’t care what he had. I’m *not* going back there.”

“But it was your first option.”

“Yes, before I knew the owner was a psycho.”

Ella shakes her head. I wonder if she’s disappointed by my decision, or if she agrees with me. She says, “I probably wouldn’t either. I mean, who wants to work for a czar?” She cuts up a banana, letting the pieces fall into her bowl.

I give her an inquisitive gaze. Ella *doesn’t* like my decision. She had that same look on her face when we were in college – the day I told her I changed my mind about pursuing a master’s degree, deciding to settle for the Bachelors. She wanted me to go for it, but I’d had enough of school at that point. Still, I think about the decision sometimes. Am I a person who gives up too easily? What if I would’ve gone for it? I probably wouldn’t be in this predicament – that’s for sure.

“Ella, you think I should give it another go, don’t you?”

“Not if you don’t want to. I mean, if it was someone else doing the interviewing, I’d say yes, but from the sound of that email, most likely it’ll be him again, so no. Save your sanity.”

“Should I respond to the email?”

“Yes, you should, and your response should be, *bite me*.”

I laugh at her while I’m chewing. I know CEOs don’t usually write their own emails, anyway, and from what I saw on Monday, Mr. DePaul has his executive assistant wrapped around his long fingers, so maybe she’s the one who sent this email on his behalf. I decide to reply with:

**To: Essex DePaul**

**From: Quintessa Bailey**

**Date: Wednesday, February 2, 2022 08:15:13 EST**

**Subject: Re: Accounting Associate**

**No, thanks. I’m good.**

**Quintessa**

—

“Man, that felt good!”

Ella's eyes grow big. "You replied?"

"I did," I say, all smiles.

She lifts a brow. "You didn't say *bite me*, did you?"

"Isn't that what you told me to say?"

She stops stirring her oatmeal. "Quin, I was joking," she says, red-faced.

Amused, I say, "I'm kidding. I didn't say that. I just said, *I'm good*, and left it at that." I release a soft chuckle. "I wish I could see the look on his face when his executive assistant makes him aware of this. No, you can't get *everything* you want, Mr. Uptight DePaul."

"That'll teach him," Ella says, rooting for me, although I'm quite certain men like Essex don't learn any lessons. Some random woman declining a job offer is hardly a loss when he can get anyone he wants to take the job.

Ella moves her blond hair behind her ears and asks, "What time is your interview this morning?"

"It's at ten. I figure I'll leave here at 9:15 so I can get there with plenty of time to spare. I don't want to run into the same problem I had at DePaul & Company."

"Good idea."

"When I get my first paycheck, I promise I'm going to go shopping for clothes so I don't have to raid your closet every time I need to wear something nice."

"Girl, I don't mind. I work from home. I don't wear half of those clothes."

Another email comes through – a reply to the one I just sent.

**To: Quintessa Bailey**

**From: Essex DePaul**

**Date: Wednesday, February 2, 2022 08:21:42 EST**

**Subject: Re: Accounting Associate**

**Call me before 9 a.m. I'm going into a meeting.**

**Thanks,**

**Essex DePaul**

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“Unbelievable,” I blurt out. “Another email came through.”

“Shut up!” Ella says, beside herself.

“It says I should call him before nine because he has a meeting.”

“He’s a persistent little booger, isn’t he?” she asks, then stuffs her mouth with a spoonful of oatmeal.

“It’s not him. It *can’t* be him. It’s his assistant, Shanice. She probably doesn’t know what happened yesterday, so let me enlighten her.”

“You’re sending another email?”

“Yep.”

I reply:

**To: Essex DePaul**

**From: Quintessa Bailey**

**Date: Wednesday, February 2, 2022 08:28:19 EST**

**Subject: Re: Accounting Associate**

Hi, Shanice. I know you’re sending these messages on Mr. DePaul’s behalf, but I won’t be coming in for any further interviews. I was humiliated beyond belief on Monday. I refuse to put myself through anything like that again, so you can stop emailing me.

**Quintessa**

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“Okay. I replied and addressed *her* this time so she can know what happened.”

“That should take care of it, then,” Ella says, placing her bowl in the sink. “Let’s hope so. Well, I have to get to my desk, so good luck with your interview. I know you’ll do good.”

“Thanks, Ella.”

I take my time finishing breakfast and browsing the Internet, checking my social media and all – just killing time since I have plenty of it. That free time is interrupted by a phone call coming through from that 850 number. It’s the same

number that was in those emails I received from DePaul & Company.

I answer, “Hello?”

“It wasn’t Ms. Davison emailing you. It was me.”

My body stills at the sound of his powerful voice, sending shock waves through my veins, electrifying my nerves and rattling me all over again like he did on Monday. I ask, “Why are you bothering me?”

“Bothering you?”

“Yes. That’s what I said.”

“I was calling to talk about the job—”

“I don’t want the job. End of discussion.”

With a rapidly beating heart, I hang up the phone quickly, drop it on the table and look at it like it has just betrayed me.

It rings again. I glance at the display.

It’s him.

I let it ring.

“Go harass somebody else, bozo,” I say, powering my phone off after the ringing stops.

Not getting a job at DePaul & Company is probably the *best* thing that could’ve happened to me, especially considering the entitled CEO is a little off his rocker.

I gather my purse, resume and phone and I’m out the door, heading to Dominion. I’m more nervous than I thought I would be when I get there – still a little rattled by Mr. DePaul’s emails and phone calls, but I give myself a pep talk and get out of the car. I meet the recruiter at the site. It’s how they do things. He gives me a vote of confidence, reiterating my qualifications for the position and assures me I don’t have anything to worry about. He reminds me that Dominion is actively seeking five candidates and they’re looking to hire on the spot. I’m determined to be one of those five people.

When I hear my name called, I follow the woman to the conference room while silently cheering myself on, saying, *You got this, Quintessa*. And I can hear my mom's voice saying, *where there's a will, there's a way*. I've certainly got the will. And nobody's getting in my way this time.

# Chapter 6

Essex



It irks me to no end when I have to alter my schedule at the fault of someone else. I'm not talking about changing it for a family emergency or anything like that. Of course, issues as such can't be avoided. I'm talking more along the lines of canceling meetings to go chasing after a woman – something I usually never do, by the way, but this case is different. I'm chasing Quintessa to fill this position. If she thinks she can avoid me by turning off her cell phone, she's in for a rude awakening. I didn't get to the top by being avoided, nor do I accept any form of rejection when it comes to business. I'm a go-getter. The old me would've given up. This new man I am – he's relentless.

I have my driver, Cooper, pull the car around. He opens the back door. I step inside, get comfortable, then he closes it. When he's back in the driver's seat, he asks, "Where to, Mr. DePaul?"

I give him Quintessa's address. He asks no further questions – just the way I like it. No noise. No music. No nothing. He just drives.

When we arrive at the apartment complex – took about twenty minutes to get here – I take a minute to look around. The place looks decent enough. The grounds are decorated with palm trees like every other dwelling place in Florida. I get out, straighten my jacket and thread one of the buttons before walking to building 6419 in search of apartment 'E'.

It's probably on the second level since A, B, C and D are on level one. I jog up the stairs and find her apartment around the corner. There's no doorbell, so I knock, trying to figure out how this is going to go. What if she's in here and doesn't come to the door? I already know she's turned her phone off after we talked earlier. I tried to call it on the ride over, only to have it go straight to voicemail.

I knock again.

This time I hear someone behind the door, unlocking it and asking *who is it*, but I don't say a word. It's not Quintessa's voice. When the door opens all the way, there's a white woman standing there wearing a confused outfit – a sweatshirt and plaid pajama shorts. She doesn't know if she's hot or cold. She has on a headset – the kind people who work at call centers wear, a pair of faded blue sweatpants with holes in the knees and a nice blouse. Working remotely has forced people to get half-dressed. I'm not here to judge the girl's fashion choices. I'm here for *my* girl.

“Can I help you?” she inquires.

“Let's hope so. I'm looking for Quintessa Bailey. Is she home?”

“Who wants to know?”

“I'm Essex DePaul.”

“Oh,” she says flashing a pinched, uneasy expression like she's heard some unflattering news about me. Quintessa has probably told her all about the interview.

“Well? Is she here or not?”

After a fake smile, she answers, “Sorry. Quintessa is not here.”

“Sounds like you're lying.”

The girl snaps her head back and says, “Even if I was, this is *my* apartment, Mr. DePaul. Goodbye.”

She attempts to close the door, but I prevent the door from closing with my new Berluti leather oxford shoes. She looks down at my foot and says, “What are you doing?”

“Preventing a door from being slammed in my face. Where is Quintessa?”

“Why? Haven’t you ridiculed her enough?”

*Ridiculed?* I’ll admit I was a little rough on Quintessa on Monday, but ridiculed? Hardly. Yesterday was child’s play. I tell her, “I take it she told you all about the interview.”

“Of course she did. Why are you here after what you did?”

“I think Quintessa will be a good fit for the position and a complement to the existing team.”

“And you came all the way over here to tell her that today, but you couldn’t tell her that on Monday?”

I’m getting frustrated by the questions, but I do admire her loyalty. I say, “Listen—do you want your friend to have a chance to work at a million-dollar firm that will make her career or not?”

The girl rolls her ocean blue eyes.

“Where is she?” I ask while playing detective and glancing behind her, looking for any sign of Quintessa’s presence.

“She’s on an interview,” she tells me, finally giving me the intel I seek.

“Where?”

“Dominion Financial.”

I leave her there at the door and jog back down the stairs. I slide in the back of the car and tell Cooper to floor it to Dominion Financial. There’s no way my girl is working for the competition.



# Chapter 7

Quintessa



Ah...I can breathe and all is right with the world. I got the job! My interviewer, Amy Madisen, was cordial and professional – a far cry from my experience at DePaul & Company. I'm excited to think of all the things this job will do for me. The first thing I'm getting is an apartment, and after I've worked for a while, I will have saved up enough money to get a new car. This job is more than just a job – it's my ticket to independence again. To starting over. My mother used to say that in life, we're allowed to start over as many times as we need to, so I don't feel bad about starting from scratch. It means I haven't given up. I'm still in the race. That's my motivation.

*You did it, Quintessa. You did it!*

I walk out of the building feeling on top of the world – a feeling like there's nothing I can't do. That feeling comes crashing to the ground when I see the cream-colored Maybach parked out front with a well-dressed man getting out of the back. A man I recognize.

It's Essex flippin' DePaul.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," I say in a monotone to myself. My heart is pounding so hard and fast, I'm momentarily deaf. I'm so peeved, my vision blurs. I don't want to deal with this man. I never wanted to see him again and here he is, in my line of sight. I'm in fight or flight mode. I choose *flight*. I'm eagerly looking for escape routes to get

away from this man, but his presence is so larger-than-life, I can't think clearly enough to come up with a suitable getaway plan. I'm stuck between this building and this tower of testosterone who shouldn't be here. Why is he here, exactly?

*Okay, maybe this has nothing to do with you, girl. He probably has business with somebody here, and the fact that he's here is a mere coincidence. Just walk on by like you don't see him.*

I'll try the walk-by approach. It's all I've got at the moment. I'm looking down at my shoes, slowly making my way closer and closer to where he's standing when he asks, "What are you doing here?"

I glance up quickly to see who he's looking at – to determine if the question was directed at me.

It was.

His eyes are locked in on me like he has a score to settle.

"What are *you* doing here?" I ask, tossing the question back at him.

"I posed my question to you first. Answer it," he says brusquely.

My mouth slacks open and I'm nearly at a loss for words at his demanding tone. The nerve of him. Either he's not aware of his offensive nature, or he just doesn't care how it's received by the recipient.

I tell him, "I don't have to answer anything. Why do you think you have total control over people? How'd you even know I was here?"

My questions go into one ear and straight out of the other. He says, "You were here for an interview and by the smile I saw on your face when you stepped outside, you got the position. But here's the thing – I'm going to need you to turn down the offer, Ms. Bailey. The position at my company is better suited for someone with your qualifications."

"Oh, please. How do you know anything about my *expertise*? You didn't get to hear me talk about my skills or

anything else. All you did was harass me and kicked me out of your building.”

“I didn’t *kick* you out, and I didn’t harass you, Ms. Bailey.”

“Okay. Belittle—is that a better word? You know what—I’m not doing this. This is sad. It really is because what it means is, you’re so much of a jerk, you don’t realize when you’re being one. It all comes naturally to you, doesn’t it?”

I keep on walking to my car when I hear the soles of his leather shoes keeping up with my pace. I’m tempted to take off in a full sprint, but I don’t want him to think I’m *running* from him. Who is *he* that I should run away and not stand my ground?

He says, “I will double whatever they offered you, plus three paid weeks of vacation and sick leave.”

I roll my eyes. While his offer sounds tempting, I’d be making a deal with the devil if I accepted anything this man threw out at me. Plus, I’d have to work in the same building as him, and that’s just unacceptable. I can’t stand being this close and we’re outside. The very thought of being in the same building, even if we were on different floors, would make me shudder.

I say, “No, thanks.”

“You’re being unreasonable, Ms. Bailey.”

“No, *you’re* the one being unreasonable.” I unlock my car door and continue, “And you should not be here. You have no business here. I am *not* your property. Go find someone else who fits the mold of what you’re looking for.”

“If you would be quiet—”

“You be quiet!”

He pauses at my sharpened glare for a moment, then continues, “You won’t be working directly for me. You’ll be working for a department that desperately needs you. You’ll report directly to that department head. I’ll hardly ever see you if that’s any consolation.”

“It’s not. Let me tell you something, Mr. DePaul. I came here to Dominion this morning for my interview and it was drama-free. It started on time, I didn’t spill coffee on myself, no one called me a *liar*, I didn’t break a heel and most importantly, the CEO didn’t disparage me. I think here is the better option.” I pull the door handle to open the door.

“Then give me your price,” he says, pushing the door back closed as if I can’t leave because he hasn’t dismissed me yet.

“I don’t *have* a price. I know this is hard for you to believe, but everyone can’t be bought.”

“Oh, but everyone needs something, and from what I gather, you’re out on your tail—living with your best friend.”

“If I’m living with someone, I’m not out on my tail, then am I?” I try to pull the door open again, but his hand is pressed against it, preventing me from getting it open.

“Move,” I tell him.

Completely unbothered and ignoring my request, he asks, “How much did Dominion offer you?”

“Enough, now move so I can go.”

He smiles. His white teeth are brighter than my future. He says, “A place like this would probably pay about seventeen dollars an hour for entry-level accounting. So, I’ll pay you thirty-four dollars an hour. You’ll get three weeks of vacation and sick leave. You’d be foolish to turn that down, Ms. Bailey.”

Instead of thinking about why this man tracked me down and is willing to pay me so much, I’m standing here thinking about all the things I could do if I made *that* kind of money. I would have my own apartment within a month’s time – maybe even a couple of weeks. I could save money instead of living paycheck-to-paycheck, travel, go to concerts and live comfortably like I used to but ten times better.

I say, “I’ll think about it.” If I can get away from him, I can give this proposal a rational, unbiased look, but the more he talks, the more my intuition is telling me to run for the hills.

“I need an answer right now.”

*Of course Mr. Instant Gratification needs an answer now...*

Now, I’m curious about him and his demeanor. I take my hand from the door handle and crossing my arms, I ask, “Why do you need an answer right this moment?” *Besides the fact that you’re a control freak...*

“Because I’ll need you to start in the morning.”

“In the—”

“Morning, yes,” he says, cutting me off and finishing my question. “You don’t have to repeat it. Do you want the job or not?”

*Don’t do it, Quintessa.*

Something is shady about this whole thing. But there’s nothing shady about thirty-four dollars an hour being directly deposited into my account every two weeks, is it? And I’ve never been one to let a man interfere with my bag and what’s the absolute worst that could happen? Money and incentives surely could encourage me to tolerate him eventually, right? And if it doesn’t, I could just get another job.

“All right,” I respond. “Deal.”

His lips curve into a sinister smile as if he’s satisfied after cajoling me into this job. “Good. Be there tomorrow at 8:00 a.m. Orientation will begin at 9:00 with breakfast and coffee. Don’t be late.”

He saunters away with a slight bow in his right leg – a walk so sick, so sensational, I almost drool, as if the cologne didn’t do enough to rouse my senses.

I break out of a trance and get into my car. Sitting in the driver’s seat with my pulse still racing, I ask myself, “Quintessa, what have you done?”

What *have* I done? If I have to ask myself, I know this quick decision I made is not sitting well with my spirit.

I take out my phone to call Ella. My hand is shaking so bad, I can hardly press the power button to turn it back on. Once I

do, I dial her number.

She answers, “Quin, where have you been? I’ve been trying to call you.”

The panic in her voice has me alarmed more than the run-in with Mr. DePaul. “Ella, what’s wrong?”

“He was here! That—Essex DePaul dude. He was here! I told him you were at Dominion. I’m so sorry. It’s like he coerced it out of me.”

“Ella, calm down. It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“Did he come over there?”

“Yeah, he did. I just got finished talking to him.”

“And?”

“I accepted a position with his company, but somehow I feel like that’s going to bite me in the butt later.”

“You accepted a position with his company? After everything that happened on Monday? Are you crazy?”

“I know, Ella. It’s absurd, but he offered to pay me a lot of money and—”

“Your sanity is more important than money, Quin.”

“I don’t mind being insane if it comes with a hefty check. And, anyway, what’s done is done, so I guess we’ll see how it turns out. I start tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow! You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No, I’m not.” I watch Mr. DePaul’s Maybach drive off. “The offer was just too good to pass up.”

Ella releases a worried sigh. “Then we’re just going to hope for the best. I’ll be there to support you either way it goes.”

My fidgety hands can hardly maintain enough stability to start my car, and I can’t stop my leg from bouncing. I close my eyes and take a calming breath because, honestly, I don’t know how this job is going to go. I drift to the worst-case scenario of me starting and then having to quit because of him and being right back to square one. Or, it could be that it goes well. The

thought of showing up there tomorrow has my stomach roiling. I suppose if I stop speculating and just wait until I get there, I'll discover that everything will be fine, so I try to forget about everything that happened on Monday and hope for the best. It's the only way I can stop my hands from shaking so I can start this car and go home.

# Chapter 8

Quintessa



Orientation goes just the way Mr. DePaul told me it would. I'm in a conference room on the first floor where there are bagels, eggs, bacon and coffee. Imagine my surprise when I learn I'm the only new hire going through orientation today, so what's with the breakfast buffet?

While eating, I watch some boring videos where people I don't know are talking about the company's culture and core values. I swear companies make you watch this crap just to keep the new person out of their way. Another video comes on explaining the dress code: business informal. Men are supposed to wear a business suit with a tie or a nice pair of slacks and a sports jacket. Women are to wear business suits or dresses with high or low heels. I should've known this company wouldn't be business casual. That would be too easy.

Next, I watch a video about the company's start, hosted by Mr. DePaul, explaining how he built this company from a one-bedroom apartment and grew it into the conglomerate it is today. He's so confident and suave when he speaks, it's almost sickening. I never understood how people could transform themselves into a corporate working machine like he apparently has, but I suppose somebody had to do it. And he's just talking and talking and talking like he's one of those people who loves the sound of their own voice. Everything about him screams arrogance and I'm sure he doesn't care in the least.



The snooze fest continues with yet another presentation. This one is about the benefits package and health insurance mumbo jumbo. I'm trying to be thankful that I have this job, but I'm bored out of my mind and my booty is numb from sitting in this chair for so long. I need a break. After the video is done, I get up slowly so the feeling gradually comes back to my legs and walk to the bathroom. After using the facilities, I wash my hands and stretch, then check my lip gloss. A white girl with light purple hair walks into the bathroom wearing a red short-sleeved blouse, a short purple leather skirt and black calf-length combat boots. She has on black lipstick. There are two piercings beside her lips and one on her nose. Maybe she should watch the dress code video again.

"Sup, newbie," she drawls out.

Naturally, a smile comes to my face. "Hi, I'm—"

She steps into a stall and slams the door closed.

"Oooo-kaaay. I'm nobody," I say quietly and exit, returning to the dreaded conference room.

Shanice walks in and asks, "How are you liking it so far?"

"Um...ah...I'm just going to say it. It's boring."

"I know, but we all had to sit through it. It's company policy."

"Sure. I understand."

*Understand that this is a total waste of time.*

Shanice goes over a few more company items with me before the human resources manager makes her grand entrance – a high-energy black woman with bouncy coils and burgundy oval nails. She discreetly has me sign a contract with the amount Mr. DePaul generously offered me in the parking lot yesterday, so he's talked to all the right people to make it happen. After I sign, she tells me to keep everything hush-hush. If my coworkers knew how much money I was about to make up in here, it would cause a riot. Ain't none of their business how much money I make, anyway.

I meet my manager. Her name is Greta Wilburn. She's an older, silver-headed, heavysset woman. She looks young in the face, but you know she ain't young because she still wears those blazers with shoulder pads. And if that wasn't enough proof, those curls in her hair are the product of foam rollers. She looks like somebody's grandma who'd be savvy at making somewhat acceptable TikTok videos and knows what a *sneaky link* is. She's pretty cool, but I can tell the woman is burnt out. Is it the job or management? I assume it's a little of both.

I meet my coworkers. There are two white guys. Jake is the cool one – has a swoop at the front of his brown hair and talks like a frat boy. I bet he likes Hip Hop music, too. Ian is more reserved. Wears glasses. *Thick* glasses that look like little round magnifying glasses. Every time I glance over at him, he's squinting, looking at the computer – making a face like something stinks. Makes me wonder if the glasses are actually working. Mauve is light-skinned with freckles, and yes, her real name is Mauve (which I'm secretly digging). With her pale purple hair, I recognize her as the girl who spoke to me in the bathroom. And then there's Zahara – like the dessert but with a 'Z' instead of an 'S'. She has the same dark brown complexion as me – a real sista – the kind that'll give you the lay of the land and not all that sugar-coated nonsense people like to hide in offices like these. Today, she has on some wooden earrings the shape of the African continent and is rocking a natural hair twist out. I'm having lunch with her at the café downstairs and she already thinks I'm her new work bestie. She's spilling more tea than I'm able to wipe up.

“Oh, thanks for buying me lunch.”

“No problem, girl. I try to be as courteous as possible to the newbies, 'cause you gon' need it.”

I ask, “How long have you worked here?”

“Three years, and trust me, girl, I didn't think I was going to make it for a while there until I finally got the swing of things.”

“How long did that take you so I can know what to expect?”

“You’ll be comfortable after about three months, give or take. And you’ll have a good understanding of everyone’s personalities, too. Once you get Greta’s nailed down, it’s smooth sailing. But girl, in the beginning, don’t let Greta intimidate you. Half the time she’s got a stick up her butt because if the team does anything wrong, the dictator comes wielding his mighty sword at her, not us.”

“Let me guess—the dictator is Mr. DePaul.”

She falls back laughing. “You’re a quick, study I see.”

“Only because I had a run-in with him already...don’t want that to happen again.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say my first interview was a disaster.” I take a bite of this chicken wrap and look around. This café is busier than most at-work cafeterias. And the ambiance is unmatched. There’s a wall of cascading water in the center of the large eating area. The chairs are spaced apart far enough to give people a little privacy with their conversations. Green, lush plants are plenty. The place feels like an oasis where one can get a brief reprieve from a stressful workday. That must’ve been the vibe he was going for with this setup.

I ask, “Is this the cafeteria for workers in this building only, or do outside people eat here, too?”

“It started out as a restaurant for the building, but when word got out about how good the food was since Mr. DePaul hired famous chefs and baristas, everybody in walking distance comes to eat and get their morning beverage of choice at *The Restaurant at DePaul’s*.”

“That’s the name of it?”

“It is now. Google it. You’ll only find five-star reviews.”

“Hmm...interesting.” I continue eating, noticing a group of women walking in, giggling and laughing. They’re dressed professionally and there’s nothing informal about it, which has me thinking about the dress code from the video. I ask Zahara, “So what exactly is business-informal?”

She grins. “Girl, don’t pay that mess no mind. I wear a pair of black leggings every day with a blouse and heels or sandals. Greta looks like she wears her church clothes, Mauve dresses like she’s a member of *Kiss*, and Ian looks like he could be Steve Urkel’s brother from another mother. As long as you look decent, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Thanks for telling me that. I don’t want to spend my first paycheck on clothes. Correction—I can’t *afford* to spend my check on clothes.”

“Yeah, you don’t have to. Nobody will be sweating you like that unless you come up in here wearing gym clothes or something. And it also depends on what kind of mood you catch Mr. DePaul in...he’s a bad man around here. We all try to avoid him. If you ever pass him in the hallway, do not—I repeat—*do not* make eye contact with him.”

I chuckle. “It’s like that, huh?” I ask, but I’m already knowing the level of absurdity that comes along with Mr. DePaul. Still, I need to know what she knows.

“It is.” Zahara takes a sip of water then looks around like gossipers do when they’re about to talk about somebody. She says, “When we know he’s on the floor, we message each other with the words *code red*. Greta is even in on it.”

“Stop lying.”

“Girl, I lie to you not.”

I hold back a snort. “And what’s the point of warning each other of his presence?”

“So you can keep your job!” I shake my head and feel my stomach cinch at the same time. When I took the job, I was under the impression I’d hardly ever see him. I should’ve gotten it in writing. I ask, “How often is he on the sixth floor?”

“Every now and again. His office is like a penthouse suite. He doesn’t leave the twelfth floor often. He sends his executive assistant to do everything.”

“You’re talking about Shanice?”

“Yes...poor girl. She’s like a track star at this point—a track star in six-inch stilettos. We call them ankle breakers. Folks be placing bets on when she’ll twist her ankle.”

A smirk spreads across my face. “That’s so wrong.”

“Nah, what’s wrong is them shoes...trying to be all cute like Mr. DePaul checkin’ for her, and he ain’t.” She falls back laughing.

I say, “The heels are cute, but ain’t no way I could walk in them all day.”

“Chile, me either.” Zahara uses a straw to sip on a green drink – looks like some kind of smoothie. When she’s sipped to her satisfaction, she says, “I don’t know how Shanice tolerates him.”

“Have you ever asked her?”

“No! She is an extension of him, so I stay away from the broad.” She takes a breath then continues where we left off before by saying, “But, no, Mr. DePaul doesn’t come down to the lower levels to visit us *peasants* often, but when he does, it’s huge. It’s like somebody’s-about-to-get-fired huge! That’s why we’re short-staffed now. He fired the girl who had your spot. Guess why?”

“Why?” I ask, hoping it’s not for something ridiculously absurd.

Zahara answers, “Because she was two minutes late.”

“Two minutes? Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I wish I was. With him, you have to cross every T and dot your I’s. Or he will find you, and he will kill you.” She cackles. “I’m just kidding about the *kill you* part. It’s from the movie...*Taken*.”

“Oh, right.”

She continues eating and then keeps on yapping it up, or shall I say, *spilling the tea*. She says, “I heard Mr. DePaul had a woman for every day of the week – Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday *and* Saturday—”

“Thanks for telling me the days of the week, Zahara. I had no idea...”

She cackles. “You’re funny, Tez.”

“Tez?” This chick done gave me a nickname? I didn’t think we were that cool just yet. After all, this is my first day.

She says, “Yes. I met with the team and we decided your nickname would be Tez. We all have nicknames. It’s no biggie. Embrace it.”

My eyes narrow. I’m officially declassifying her as a sista. She’s been brainwashed somehow. This is not sista behavior. I ask her, “What’s your nickname?”

“It’s Zee. Jake is *Bieber* for obvious reasons. Ian’s nickname is *Glasses* and we call Mauve, *Rockstar*.”

“Interesting. What about Greta?”

“She’s not included, though sometimes, Jake calls her *Greta the Great*.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Count yourself lucky, Quintessa. We didn’t give Mauve her nickname until *after* she proved herself. You’re in already. But, as I was saying, those chicks who Mr. DePaul entertains—guess what? They’re not allowed to come to his fancy house. He has a luxury condo in a high-rise at Panama City Beach. That’s where it all goes down. And as for his house... why does a single man need a ten-bedroom mansion? Answer that for me.”

“For status I suppose.”

She shrugs. “And his driver—have you seen him? He’s completely adorable. He’s the total opposite of the *dictator*. One day, I saw him standing beside the Maybach waiting for Mr. DePaul to come out of the building, and he winked at me with his cute self. Woo-wee...I bet he has some stories to tell.”

*Ugh...enough about Mr. DePaul already.*

I enjoy getting the scoop about Mr. DePaul, but I don’t need it to take up my entire lunch break. I switch up the subject and

ask her what a typical day for her is like when I watch her eyes grow big.

“Um...are you okay?” I ask.

She says, “O-M-frickin’-G. He’s here.”

My heart nearly stops. “Who?”

“Mr. DePaul!” she whisper-screams. “What is he doing in the café? He always sends Shanice down here to get whatever he wants. This is a first!”

“Maybe Shanice is on her lunch break.”

“No. He *makes* her eat at her desk so she’s always there. This is crazy, girl. Keep your head down.”

“What?”

“Keep your head down, meaning just eat and blend in so you’re not singled out.”

“Am I going to get fired for eating incorrectly?” I ask, amused.

“You might,” she responds, and the girl is as serious as a heart attack. She looks worried. Now, she has me concerned.

I follow her lead and focus on eating for a few minutes, then ask, “Zahara, why do you work here if Mr. DePaul’s very presence intimidates you so much?”

“Because I need dem dollaz. And even more important than that, you can get far in your career if you add DePaul & Company to your resume. Trust me, people are legit impressed and will pay you top dollar. I’m trying to work here until I hit the five-year mark, and then I can take that experience and move on to another company straight into a managerial position. I guess employers figure if you can survive working here, you can do anything. So, I do what I have to do and go home. That’s the same attitude you need to have. Do what you have to do, then leave. Get in and get out.”

I glance over to where Mr. DePaul is standing, momentarily defying Zahara’s advice to keep my head down. The man is gorgeous – so much so that he makes my eyes squint – but his

attitude makes his attractiveness take a nosedive. At least that's the way I see it. I know some women who might like it, though. Arrogance from a handsome, wealthy man is easy to take because it's almost expected. Why not be cocky when you have it all – looks, money and the smarts to wrap it all in a neat little bow?

My gosh...

He has on a black suit today. I can tell it rests on broad shoulders attached to an athletic, muscular body. If you're going to do it big in life – and surely Mr. DePaul is doing just that – you had to have the whole package, which included physical health. And the way he wears his suits...nothing looked more dapper on a man than a tailored suit anchored on a toned body. From this far away, his beard appeared darker, or maybe it's fuller than the last time I saw him up close. Whatever the case, it makes his eyes look like they're darker, too, and that adds mystery to the man who everyone is scared of around here.

He orders a beverage – I'd guess a Frappuccino. It must be one heck of a drink for him to come down here and get it himself. He takes a sip then answers his cell phone while looking in my direction, catching my eyes.

Time stands still.

Something shifts like I'm in the matrix. Zahara told me not to look up. I should've listened, but his presence is so powerful, I couldn't resist. I need a blindfold like Sandra Bullock in Birdbox to ensure I make it out of the building safely without ever being on his radar or staring into his eyes again.

I look down at my plate, but take another glance up at him again.

*Crap!*

He's still looking over here. I quickly return my attention to my food. I take a bite of this fish taco and chew so fast, my tastebuds don't register the flavor."

"You looked at him, didn't you?" Zahara asks.



“He’s like right there. *Everybody* in here is looking at him.”

“Um—not ya girl.”

“Well, your back is toward him, so the urge to look isn’t hitting you as hard as it has me.”

I glance over to where he’s standing. This time, he’s not there. I give the café a full sweep. Mr. DePaul is gone like a feather in the wind. Thank goodness! Perhaps the color can come back to Zahara’s face now. This man got these people up in here shook.

“He’s gone now, Zahara.”

“Whew! I can breathe,” she says. “Lord knows I need my job.”

“We all do, but you shouldn’t let someone get to you like that.”

“Like what?”

“Frazzled and disturbed to the point that you try to avoid making eye contact, fearing you’d lose your job somehow.”

“Everybody around here does that. You’re just not used to it yet, but you’ll fall in line. And Mr. DePaul is not just *someone*. He’s *the* man. His name carries weight around here. I heard people he’s fired have a hard time finding a job anywhere else. But anyway, lunch is almost over. Oh, and that reminds me... make sure you pay attention to your time when you’re on your lunch break. We have to log out of our computers when we leave and log back in when we return. If you’re over one minute, you’re considered late. Five of those and you’re out on your tail.”

“Wow. I didn’t think we were going to be micromanaged up in here.”

“It’s not really micromanaging. No one is standing over you to make sure you do your job. Greta won’t sweat you like that, either. As long as your work is getting done on time, she’s cool.”

“That’s good to know. Thanks for all the information. Hopefully now I have what it takes to survive around here.”

Zahara gathers her trash and stands up. I follow suit and then, just like that, I'm back sitting in the conference room, preemptively pouring some coffee to get me through the second half of the day. While waiting for Shanice to return, I sip and think about everything Zahara has told me about work-life here. If I keep my head down and do my job, I'll be okay, she says. I make a mental note of that. It still baffles me how people are so scared of Mr. DePaul. Does he have a larger-than-life presence? Yes. Is he rude? Absolutely. Condescending? No doubt. But all of this isn't necessarily surprising when you consider who he is. He's the quintessential CEO of a multi-million-dollar company. If he wasn't cocky, I'd think something was wrong with him.

Anyway, to be on the safe side of things, I'm going to take Zahara's advice to keep my head down and avoid Mr. DePaul at all costs. Little does she know, it was my plan all along.

# Chapter 9

Quintessa



Ella transferred forty dollars into my account and told me to pick up dinner on the way home, so immediately after work, I picked up a twelve-pack of tacos. I walk to the kitchen and place the box on the table and go to my room to change into comfortable clothes. I don't know why, but coming home to this apartment – Ella's apartment – today feels less homey, and that's probably because I'm so close to getting my own and making *it* an oasis. A haven. A place where, after a long, hard day on the job, I can unwind and prepare myself for the next day, and the next. Currently, me and Ella live like college students. Her apartment, though cozy, reminds me of my college years. For most people, college was a time of discovery – figuring out what you want out of life and possibly finding that special person to go on that journey with. It wasn't that way for me. I settled into college life like I'd be there forever. Finding a man wasn't on the agenda. My grades were. Honing my skills for the workforce was my motivation to stay focused, get my degree and get out of there.

That's what I did. Four years and I was walking into the workforce like I was going to tell somebody else how to do *their* job and run their business. I started at the bottom of the pay scale because I didn't have any real-world experience, but I gradually worked my way up, and now this job is paying me thirty-four dollars an hour. Still, I know it's only because of the deal I made with Mr. DePaul, and I'm still baffled why he

wanted me so badly for this position that he'd be willing to pay double the normal salary.

When I return to the kitchen to eat, Ella is cramming a taco in her mouth.

“Slow down, El. It ain't going nowhere,” I quip.

“Thank you so much,” she garbles with a mouth full. “I haven't had tacos in so long.”

I take a hard-shell taco from the box and take a bite.

“How was your first day?” she asks excitedly.

“It was...hmm...how do I put this? Interesting.”

“You didn't run into that awful man, did you?”

“No, but there's a café on the first floor and I saw him in there. I didn't talk to him or anything—just saw him and that was unnerving enough. Trust me. Anyway, I had lunch with one of my coworkers and she told me to avoid him like the plague, girl. They're all scared of him.”

“I can see why. His presence is intimidating. When he came here *demanding* to see you, I was trying to remember where I put my stun gun.” She chuckles. “I thought he was going to barge in here to find you.”

“It was that bad?”

“Yes. It's like he had this air of entitlement when it came to you.”

“Yeah, well, you know I already had a run-in with him and don't want another. I was surprised to see him in the café today since Zahara told me he never comes to the café.”

“Who's Zahara?”

“My coworker, Ella. Keep up. So Zahara sees him the moment he comes into the cafeteria and her whole body locked up like she was scared to move a muscle. I glanced up at him and I swear he was looking directly at me from way across the café. And what's crazy is, Zahara told me he *never* comes to the café. He gets his assistant to do everything for

him, but today, he came to the café. I thought that was interesting.”

“Do you think he came down looking for you?” Ella asks, reaching for another taco.

“No. Why would he be looking for me?”

Ella shrugs. “It’s not like he hasn’t done it before.”

“That was when he wanted me to get the job. Now that I have it, it should be a rare occurrence for me to see him or have to talk to him.”

“Well, overall, how was your first day?”

“Boring. I watched videos for seventy-two hours.”

She throws her head back, laughing.

“There was a full spread of food up in the conference room. I was the only one in training. I thought that was odd. Why would you have all this food for one person?”

“It’s not like they don’t have the money. I say enjoy it while it lasts.”

“True, but you don’t have to be wasteful just because you got money.”

“True.”

I unwrap a soft taco this time.

“So, are you going back tomorrow?” she asks.

“I am. I’m ready to get into the groove of things and know how to do my job without relying on support from anyone. I just want to get into the habit of knowing what I need to do and coming home, and hopefully after a month, I’ll find an apartment so you can have your place back.”

“Don’t rush on my account. I’m in no hurry. Just take your time.”

“Thanks, El. I will. Right now, though, I’ma take my time and eat these tacos.”

While I do, I pull up *The Restaurant at DePaul’s* on Google. Zahara was right – only five-star reviews, which I consider

highly suspicious. You mean to tell me not one person left a four-star review? They're probably scared to. Zahara did say he had connections. Ain't no telling what he'd do if he found out someone rated his place less than perfect. You play with his image, you're messing with him. Nobody wants that smoke.

# Chapter 10

Essex



I'm sitting in the back seat of the Maybach waiting for Quintessa to arrive at work. I know she's not here yet. I've been sitting here for thirty minutes and haven't seen her car. It's 7:50. Where is she? What's taking so long?

Last night I had trouble sleeping, but that's been the case since Monday – since laying eyes on her again after all these years. Last night, though, I found myself bombarded with thoughts that she wouldn't come back today. That's why I'm sitting here. Maybe orientation is too much for her. Perhaps Ms. Valentine, the girl she was sitting with in the cafeteria yesterday for lunch, spilled all the beans and caught her up to speed on life at DePaul & Company. A lot of people don't like it here. I'm aware of that. I just don't care. I don't pay people to *like* me. I pay them to work for me. As long as Quintessa does her job, we'll get along just fine.

At the café yesterday, I pretended not to see her, but of course I saw her. Can't miss her. Her beauty lights up a room. Her presence does something to my insides that leaves me questioning why I waited so long to reunite us. If she only knew...

Under normal circumstances, I do not visit the café, but because I knew she would be there, I decided to leave my office for a bit just to get a glimpse of her. It was a way I could watch her and give her space at the same time. That's all I

needed. A glimpse. It was enough to help me power through another day of long meetings.

I glance at my watch again. It's 7:55. Finally, I see her car turn into the lot. Since she's arrived so much later than some of my other staff, she has to park to the back, near the overflow lot, which will make for a longer walk to the building. She knows she has to clock in by eight once she gets login access, so why is she carelessly getting here so late, already establishing bad habits?

She's walking this way now, wearing a black-and-white checkered unbuttoned jacket, a black fitted dress that's just above her knees and black flats – doesn't look like her style at all – but after losing touch with her all these years, I don't know what her style is. This may be it for all I know. It just doesn't appear to suit her very well.

She almost breaks into a full sprint as she gets closer to my car. I step out, close the door and tap the car twice, alerting Cooper to leave. As he pulls off, I focus my attention on Quintessa. She appears to be frowning – no, she *is* frowning – as she approaches me. I watch her drop her head and cross her arms like she's trying to shield herself from the cold. Or from me. She doesn't speak – just keeps her head down and steps past me dismissively, like I'm some statuesque fixture attached to this building.

Like I'm going to accept that.

"Ms. Bailey." After calling her name, I turn around to see if she's stopped climbing the stairs. She has. I knew she would.

"Yes," she responds stiffly. It's an *annoyed* yes, but a yes, nonetheless.

"So, you made it back."

"Is that a question or a statement?"

"Neither. It's an observation."

"Oh. Well, it's chilly out here, so I'm gonna go ahead inside."

"If you're cold, why don't you zip up your jacket?"



“Because I can’t. It’s not my jacket. It’s my roommate’s and she’s thinner than I am. Any further questions, your majesty?”

I smile at her attitude. I think it’s cute. She’ll definitely need the tenacity to survive the demands of the job, but if she thinks it will deter me, she’s sorely mistaken.

I take a few steps up the stairs and stop.

She takes a few steps up, keeping the same distance between us.

I say, “I didn’t think you would come back.”

“Believe me, I thought about it.”

“Then why did you?”

She crosses her arms again, trying to warm herself from the breeze. People down here in Florida think sixty-eight degrees is cold. Back home in Detroit, sixty-eight degrees in February felt like a heat wave. I’m not fazed by it, but then again, I am wearing a suit.

She says, “I came back because I need a job. And the people I’ll be working with closely every day are a nice bunch. I really don’t need to work with or interact with anyone else outside of my team, and that includes you.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. I’ve been learning how things work around here. I think I’ll be just fine.”

She turns to head up the stairs again. I jog up to catch her.

“I wasn’t done talking to you just yet.”

Glancing at her watch, she says, “I’m supposed to be at my desk by eight, so—”

She continues inside and I trail her to the elevators, entranced by the trail of jasmine and honeysuckle scent that bounces off her and lands inside my nostrils.

She steps on.

I step on behind her. The doors close. We go up a few floors before I press the emergency stop button and turn my attention

to her.

“What are you doing?” she asks with narrowed eyes and a frown disturbing her beauty.

I want so badly for her to recognize me and remember all the good times we shared, but she has no idea who I am. I say, “I’m getting your attention.”

With a daggered glare, she asks, “Why do you need my attention?”

I shrug. “You’re in a hurry today. Take a minute to breathe.”

Confusion washes over her face. I take a moment to appreciate her presence, her face – her aura – the too-small jacket she has on and her wind-tossed hair. I can tell how heavy she’s breathing as I imagine she’s intimidated being in close quarters with who she thinks is a psycho boss. I hear her heart drumming. I soak it all in while she looks like she’s in panic mode.

To put her somewhat at ease – well as best as you can put a woman at ease after you’ve trapped her on an elevator – I ask, “How was your day yesterday?”

“Good,” she says, tight-lipped. “Why do you have to trap me in an elevator to ask me how my day was?”

“It gives me one-on-one time to talk to you without any interruptions.”

“Okay, cool. Can I get off this elevator now?”

Ignoring her question, I ask, “What about orientation? How’s that coming along?”

“Orientation is orientation. It sucks, especially since it mostly involves watching all those videos.”

“I’m sure the few videos I’m in captured your attention the most, huh?”

Quintessa doesn’t crack a smile. She’d rather be anywhere but here. She throws a hand on her hip. “Can I go now?”

“You can go when I’m done talking.” I know I’m coming across as authoritarian and sycophantic. I just can’t help

myself. This is my Tessie. My girl.

*Why don't you know who I am?* It's on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I withhold it. If she doesn't know who I am by now, it'll be to my advantage to get to know her again without all the baggage of the man I used to be.

She narrows her eyes and backs into the corner of the elevator away from me, crossing her arms again, shifting her weight from one side to the other now. She asks, "Why are you talking to me in a stopped elevator? Do you do all the new hires like this? Is this some kind of initiation?"

"Would you prefer we talk in my office?"

Her frown grows deeper. "I would prefer to come to work and do my job without being harassed."

"I'm not harassing you, Ms. Bailey."

"Then what do you call it?"

"Talking. Getting to know who's working for me. I only hire the best—"

"And you told me I was the best unless you were just gassing me up to get me to work here."

"I wasn't *gassing* you at all, but I do think you need to work on your people skills. You need to have the acumen to communicate across various teams and levels of management. You can't come across like you're annoyed most of the time."

"Oh, you think this is how I am normally? Let me enlighten you and put you at ease at the same time—it's not. I'm just this way with you."

"Why's that?"

"You know why."

"If I knew why, I wouldn't be wasting my time asking."

"Okay, then I'll just tell you. You give off this bad *energy*. I felt it when I had that botched interview with you on Monday, and I feel it now while I'm stuck in this elevator. The energy you give me, I pretty much toss it right back at you. That's why you think I'm *annoyed* all the time, but I'm really not."

“What makes you think the energy I’m giving you is bad?”

“What else is it if it’s *not* bad?”

I smile.

She rolls her beautiful, dark brown eyes and says, “Listen... I don’t know you, and you don’t know me. Let’s just keep it that way.”

“I would tend to agree, but we have to work together. You’re my employee. I need to be able to talk to you whenever and wherever I need to.”

“Really, because when I took the job, you said I wouldn’t be working with you—”

“No, what I said was you wouldn’t be working *directly* with me, and you won’t be. I have a meeting with your team once a week. That’s probably the only time you’ll see me.”

“Yeah, that and whenever you decide to wait for me outside the building or trap me in an elevator.”

I smile and slide my left hand into my pocket. “You’ll have to learn to work with me, Ms. Bailey.”

She shakes her head, releases a deep sigh, and says, “Okay, fine. What else?”

I press the button to get the elevator going again and before we get to her floor, I say, “You could at least be cordial.”

She smirks. “You sound like a hypocrite.”

“How so?”

“How are you asking me to be cordial when you’re not cordial in the least? Shouldn’t the boss lead by example by practicing what he preaches?”

“Everything doesn’t have to be an argument, Ms. Bailey.”

“And, from what I understand, only the executives speak to you. Everyone else wets their pants when they see you coming.”

When the doors open to the sixth floor, she says, “Thank goodness,” and gets off without saying a word more, walking

as fast as she can to get away from me.

On the way up to twelve, I revel in the few minutes I had to talk to her alone, knowing I wouldn't tolerate this kind of insubordination from anyone else. With her, I welcome it. It allows me to relearn her personality, but once she's a couple of weeks in, she'll know who's really in charge around here.



After working a few hours, I inform Ms. Davison I'll be out for the rest of the day. It wasn't in my plans to leave work so soon, but Quintessa hasn't left me much of a choice. She doesn't have a suitable jacket and being the gentleman I am, it's my duty to provide her with one. I could've sent Ms. Davison to do this for me, but this isn't business. It's personal. Very personal. I know Quintessa – know her style. I want to choose a jacket she'll like.

Cooper pulls up at the mall. I run into Nieman Marcus and browse the women's coat section, settling on a six-thousand-dollar, mixed-media jacket by Alexander McQueen. After paying for it, I go back to the office, place the bag on the trunk of Quintessa's car, close to the driver's side where I'm certain she'll see it. Then I call Ms. Davison's cell.

“Hi, Mr. DePaul. What can I do for you?”

“How's orientation going?”

“It's going well. She's watching a few more videos and we're going to wrap up,” she says discreetly, so I know she's in the conference room with Quintessa.

I glance at the clock. The time is 3:45. I tell her, “It's Friday. Go ahead and let her leave early. I don't want to overload her with videos. We want to make sure she comes back on Monday.”

“Oh. Okay, sir. Will do. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, that is all.”

Still in the parking lot of my building, I hang up the phone and instruct Cooper to park somewhere inconspicuous so I can see Quintessa walk to her car. Ten minutes or so after I hang up with my assistant, Quintessa comes out, walking hurriedly to her car. When she gets there, she frowns upon seeing the bag on the trunk. She picks it up, studies it, looks around and throws it in the back seat. And then she's on her way, nearly leaving on two wheels to get out of there.

# Chapter 11

Quintessa



“I know this man did not buy me a jacket.”

“What are you talking about, girl?” Ella asks, swiveling around in her chair. She’s supposed to be done with work by noon on Fridays, but it’s after four and she’s still at it. That’s one disadvantage of working from home – work is always staring you in the face, and you always feel like you should take the bait.

I say, “Look at this jacket!”

“OMG—it looks expensive and since it was in a Nieman Marcus bag, I imagine it was.” Ella tries it on and says, “It’s by Alexander McQueen, too! OMG. Who bought this for you?”

“I think it was Essex DePaul. He was parked right outside of the door when I got to work this morning—almost like he was waiting for me. He asked me why my jacket wasn’t zipped up.”

“That’s a weird question to just randomly ask somebody,” Ella says.

“Exactly. I had my arms crossed because it was a little chilly this morning, and being the jerk that he is, he’s like, *why don’t you just zip up your jacket if you’re cold?* I told him it wasn’t my jacket. Then, when I was leaving, I noticed a bag on the trunk of my car – just sitting there.”

“Okay, the next time you find some random bag on your car, don’t put it in the car. It could be a bomb or something.”

“Yeah, not likely, Ella. This ain’t CSI Miami.”

She laughs.

“So, you really think he bought it?” she asks.

“It had to have been him, especially after the exchange we had about your jacket this morning. That would be the only feasible explanation.”

Ella finds the price tag and says, “Goodness, gracious me. This thing cost six grand! Yeah, it was him. Had to be. Ain’t no average Joe around here spending that kind of money on a jacket.”

“Why would he do that, though?” I ask. “He’s so...ugh...”

“Maybe it’s all an act, Quin. He must like you, which would explain why he’d go to such extraordinary lengths to ensure you got a job there.”

“Girl please.”

“No, I’m serious. Think about it. He came looking for you over here, then he went to Dominion where you were interviewing to make you an offer you couldn’t refuse. I’d say that’s extraordinary! He *wants* you to work there. It’s all so he can keep tabs on you.”

“You think a man who’s as established and as successful as Essex wants a woman who can’t afford to live in her own apartment?”

“Stop being so hard on yourself. You’re getting there, girl. Besides, you can’t judge people based on their status in life. Life is so much more than that.”

Ella takes off the jacket. I place it back in the bag and say, “It is, but I wonder what makes some people more successful than other people. There are always extremes. Some people are living in tents and the others have so much money, they don’t know what to do with it.”



“I guess Essex found something to do with his—spend it on his beautiful new hire.” She giggles. “But for real, you better be careful. Men like him don’t do the relationship thing. And who knows, he probably did this to the last new hire.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him. Zahara told me he fired the girl I replaced because she was like two minutes late. Now, I wonder if that was the only reason.”

“Yeah, like maybe they had something going on in the workplace and it was going to blow up in his face, so he got rid of her before things escalated. See, that’s why it pays not to have no workplace romances. It’s a recipe for disaster.”

I don’t tell Ella about the elevator incident. She would surely tell me to quit and I just can’t afford to do that right now. Still, I can’t deny that this jacket ordeal has my stomach in knots. Why would he buy me a jacket? Is this dude playing mind games with me or what?

# Chapter 12

Essex



Saturday morning, I get up, lift weights, drink a protein shake and go back to bed. That's been my Saturday morning routine for a while. I got money, yes, but booking a weekend flight some place and hanging out on the yacht isn't necessarily my thing anymore, especially since I have no one to share it with. Besides, I live on the beach. I'm already in paradise, feeling the cool, sixty-degree breeze flowing through the wide-opened French doors in my bedroom as I slip my naked body between the sheets and just lie there. Thinking. About her.

Being in the elevator with her solidified my desire and determination to have her as mine. But my mannerisms always get in the way. And now that she's getting to know the employees, they're tainting her view of me, my company and what I stand for. But I can't put the blame all on them. I've done enough to make her dislike me all on my own. If only I could re-do that interview...



After spending the majority of the day at home, I get a call from Brock around six. He wants to meet up at the lounge and since I have no plans, I hop in the black Mercedes, AMG-S56, my favorite casual car to drive around town at the moment, and head to Gregory's.

“There’s the man,” Brock says when he sees me walking toward him. He lowers his cigar, stands up from a leather sofa and slaps hands with me.

Brock lives in New York, but he’s in Florida frequently for work – business and personal. He has a wife and two little girls back at home, but he doesn’t hide the fact that he has a side chick here. He’s out here playing the field like he’s not afraid to lose his family over some nonsense. Honestly, I don’t necessarily like the guy. He’s one of those light-skinned, curly hair dudes – looks like Jayson Tatum in a suit. He acts more boujee than some of these females trying to snag a baller up in here. The only thing we have in common is business. He doesn’t own a business, but he’s the chief financial officer for an energy company – so basically, he’s good at running his mouth and ripping people off.

“What’s been going on with you, my man?” he asks.

I sit down, summon the waitress and ask her to bring me my usual. She knows me, so she knows what the usual is.

Taking a deep, relaxing breath, I tell Brock, “There’s nothing much going on. Busy with the company and—”

“It’s the same ol’, same ol’ with you, ain’t it, DePaul? It’s always *the company*.”

I shrug. “That’s what I do. Make money.”

The waitress leaves my drink on the table and goes on her way.

“I heard that, my brother.”

Being home right now was certainly the better option than being here – I knew that before I left home – but since I’m here, I sip this cognac and attempt to get into conversation mode.

I ask, “How’s the wife and kids?”

“They’re good,” he says, eyeing a woman from head to heels as she struts by in a black mini-skirt, wearing a top that looks like lingerie.

“And the side chick?” I inquire. I’m not shading him. He brags about this every chance he gets and to anyone who would listen as if it gives him a status I have yet to reach.

He laughs, tosses back a shot, and says, “She’s—woo! She’s hot, man. I can’t get enough of her.”

I ask, “What do you get from her that you can’t get from your wife?”

He’s still cheesing. “You already know, man.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Oh, you want me to break it down for you. Okay. I get fun, undivided attention. I get things I don’t get from my wife. Her focus is on pleasing me, not chasing after kids and planning bake sales—all that nonsense.”

“But they’re your kids. You should be proud to have a woman who takes care of your children.”

“I am, DePaul, but I have needs, too, and I shouldn’t have to schedule time to be with my wife. It takes all the fun out of it. It’s boring, man. Family life sucks sometimes.”

“Wow.” I shake my head and take another sip while he takes a pull from the cigar. I’m blown away by his disregard for everyone – his wife, kids – it’s appalling.

He continues, “Women outnumber men, which means it’s more for us to choose from, right? I may as well have my fair share before some other dude does.”

“That’s not accurate, Brock.”

“What’s not accurate?”

“Women outnumbering men.”

“It is,” he says. “Let me tell you something, DePaul. I travel all over the United States. Everywhere I go, a woman is trying to pick me up. They see the suits, the cars—man, with all this drip, they can’t help it. They want me. All of them.”

“If you valued what you had at home, you would have the fortitude to resist those advances.”

The smile falls off his face. Looks like he's sobering up quickly. He asks, "Are you telling me I don't value my wife? The mother of my children?"

"I'm not telling you anything. Your actions should tell you everything you need to know about yourself. If your wife was doing the same thing to you, you'd leave her. Tell me I'm wrong."

He takes a pull from a cigar, crosses one leg over the other, and asks, "When did you become such a saint?"

"I'm not—far from it."

"That's what I thought. Every time we link up, you have women trying to get at you. I'm sure you've had your share."

"I'm not in a committed relationship, Brock. And let me school you on something. Just because I'm not married doesn't mean I have women all over the place."

"Man, please...like I'm going to believe that. You got drivers, mansions, vacation homes—you're what they're looking for. *We're* what they're looking for—high-value men."

I grin at this guy. He may be slightly under the influence, but I entertain him by asking, "What exactly is a high-value man in your opinion?"

"Men who got money. Men who are going places. That's us, brother, and that's on a hundred. Money equals stability. Women want to be taken care of—they don't want to be out here scrubbing toilets or doing manual labor trying to make it on their own. I don't care how many women anthems you hear about how they don't *need no man*. It sounds cute, but at the end of the day, men rule the world."

I tell him, "I have plenty of women who work for me—single women—taking care of themselves. I believe a woman would opt for a man who would be a *loyal* husband and caring father before they'd take a man strictly because he's a good provider. Women want love and respect and they deserve that. They deserve to be nurtured and protected. A man who knows how to take care of his woman and family—*that's* a high-value man."

Brock blows a cloud of smoke then says, “That’s bull. And since when did you become all philosophical? What did I miss? You done found Jesus since I last saw you?”

“I’ve always been the way that I am. You and other people just choose to see me a certain way because of what I have and all I’ve accomplished. Just because I make millions doesn’t mean I have a gaggle of women at my disposal. I’ve been there. Done that. I know the emptiness of it. I don’t want to go there again.”

Brock looks completely flummoxed. “Why not?”

“Why not what?”

“I mean, are you writing off women?”

“No. I just want only one woman.”

“And you think one woman is enough to satisfy you?”

Quintessa’s face appears in my mind like a favorite memory. It’s her I’m thinking about as I talk so I know what I’m saying is the truth. Out of all the women I’ve been with, no one could ever compare to her. No other woman could assuage me like her and I’ve never touched Quintessa besides us dancing together at our prom. And I’ve never kissed her. I want to. I need to feel her in my arms so badly, I experience a gnawing ache when I’m near her, but one step at a time.

“I don’t think, Brock. I *know* she will. This idea of having a wife, a main chick and a side chick—that’s the garbage being pushed on the radio. Tell me this—what good has resulted from this kind of lifestyle? These men out here impregnating all these women—got babies all over the place instead of keeping their family hierarchy strong and intact. I was out there a while back, but I’ve learned over the years that it’s futile. All of it. I want a family. I’m not one to be out here spreading my seed around like I’m planting a community garden. My seed is sacred. It’s *life*. It’s the life I want to create with the woman who wants to build with me, and it was meant for one woman and one woman only.”

“Is that right?”

“It’s one hundred percent right.”

“And what woman would be good enough for the famed and highly-esteemed, Essex DePaul? Show me a woman on your level who can rock with you like that?”

“She doesn’t have to be on my level.”

Brock sits up straight, points his cigar at me, and says, “That’s where you’re wrong. Jay-Z, Beyonce—same level. Barak and Michelle—same level.”

“You’re referring to famous people.”

“And you’re Florida famous! You’re a celebrity in these parts, man. How are you going to look walking around with a woman who makes minimum wage when you are who you are?”

“My woman doesn’t make minimum wage.”

“Ah, so there *is* a woman.”

“There is...been knowing her since high school.”

“Don’t tell me it’s a high school crush that’s taking my boy off the market.”

“She took me off the market a long time ago.”

“Why is this the first time I’m hearing about her?”

I pick up my glass, swirl the drink around in it and toss the rest of it back. Then I say, “I don’t talk about my personal life all that much.”

“But you’re talking about it now, which means something’s up. What’s eating at you? Get it off your chest, playboy.”

And this is what I don’t like about this guy. He can’t be serious about anything. I don’t know how he managed to work his way up to chief financial officer. I would rather let a five-year-old handle my finances before Brock. If his life isn’t in order, then nothing else is, including his job. It amazes me how clueless he is to this fact.

“There’s nothing I need to get off my chest.” I sigh and glance at my watch. I should’ve left when he started the nonsense about the ratio of women to men. A man – a *real* one – can only have one queen. That’s what I’ve learned from my

experience out here in these streets, and most likely, that man already knows who the queen is. He's already envisioned his life with her, like I've done with Quintessa too many times to count.

"Ay, is that an Audemars?" he asks, looking at my watch.

"It is."

"See, you *are* the man. That's how bosses roll! Do you think I can afford an Audemars? Not in this lifetime. Humor me... how much was that one?"

"It doesn't matter, man."

"Come on, DePaul. Tell me. Put me out of my misery."

"It was twenty-five thousand."

What he doesn't realize is I don't buy these things for status. This is just the way I dress. When you make millions of dollars, it's nothing to drop twenty-five thousand on a watch or a quarter mil on a car.

I stand up and say, "It was good seeing you, Brock, but have to be heading out. I have another engagement."

"I bet you do, player!" I slap hands with him and head for the door.

On the way there, a woman grabs my forearm. She's pretty – has lust in her eyes that tells me, if I wanted her to go home with me tonight, she's game – down for whatever.

She says, "Hey, handsome. My name is Enya. What's yours?"

Women are bold these days. While I'm all for people going after what they want, as a man, I don't want a woman chasing me. I'm the pursuer – not vice versa.

I say, "Hi. There are plenty of men up in here who are looking for women like you. I'm not one of them."

She frowns and rolls her eyes. "What you mean, women like me?"



“You know who you are.” I shake my head and continue out the door.

I get in the car and call my mother. She’s been sick for a while, but every time I call to check on her, she goes on and on about how I’ve changed. How she wants her son back like *I’m* not her son. The last time we talked – last Saturday – she told me I was hardheaded and would die alone if I didn’t change my ways.

Why would I change my ways? I like my ways. I don’t see a need to change a thing.

“Hello? Can you hear me, son?”

“Yes, Mother. I can hear you.” I start the car. “How are you?”

“I’m doing just fine. How are you on a Saturday night, or shall I ask, what are you doing?”

“I was just out for a drink.”

“Oh,” she says perkily. I can hear the excitement in her voice. “Were you on a date?”

“Mother, don’t start that again.”

“You expect me to be quiet when I’m getting old waiting for you to settle down? And let me ask you this. What’s the point of having all that money with no one to share it with? I mean, not a single soul. What’s the point?”

I’ve heard the question so many times, I already knew it was coming. I say, “What would you like for me to do, Mother? Should I walk down the street and ask some random floozy to marry me?”

“At this point, I’ll take what I can get.” She coughs. “Let’s be realistic here. I don’t want you with a floozy, but I ain’t getting no younger, son. I want to see you happy and taken care of.”

“I *am* taken care of, Mother. I have a housekeeper who takes care of my house, a chef who takes care of my food, a pool boy who takes care of the pool, and a driver who *takes* me anywhere I want to go. I’m very well *taken* care of.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, that’s fine and all, but who’s taking care of your heart?”

Her question stings because the answer is no one. I’m so used to being alone – so accustomed to being *Essex DePaul*, I’m not sure if anyone would want to. I’m not exactly what you would call *friendly*. I’m not even friendly with Quintessa and I want her so badly, I can taste her lips on the tip of my tongue. But she wouldn’t be with a man like Essex when *Stewart Dennis* is more of her speed. The only thing is, I’m not him anymore. Don’t know *how* to be him and don’t *want* to be him.

I respond to my Mother, “I don’t want to rush finding the right woman. Love can’t be rushed, Mother.”

“When you’re thirty-four years old with no prospects it can.”

I sigh and switch lanes and topics. “How’s Dad?”

“Your father’s just fine. Stop dodging my questions.”

“That’s not my intention, Mother. Do you know what is?”

“What?”

“Making sure my mother is okay. That’s the reason for my call. And now that I know you’re good, I’m going to get off this phone. It’s been a long day for me.”

“A long day of doing much of nothing, but living like a single man.”

I grin just slightly. “I *am* a single man.”

“Don’t sass me, boy.”

“Mother, my beautiful Mother—”

“Don’t try to charm me, either. Use all that charm to find me a daughter-in-law.”

“Mother.”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too, son.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

I hang up the phone as I’m pulling into my driveway. I park there tonight instead of the garage. I get out of the car, lean against it and cross my arms, staring at my own house. This house is huge – a massive mansion that sits on acres of land. I can smell the salt in the air drifting from the emerald coast that’s basically my backyard. There are balconies, a guest house by the heated, in-ground pool, an outdoor shower, a separate living area...ten bedrooms. I’ve amassed so much. I used to stand out here and be proud of what I’ve accomplished, but lately, I’ve been feeling something different. I have more than I ever had when I was growing up, but I have not a soul to share it with. When I look at my life from this perspective, it hits different.

It’s easy to pretend in public that I have it all. But when I’m alone like I am now, standing next to my expensive car, staring at a house only one percent of people in the United States can afford, this realization hits me hard – I have nothing.

Not a thing.

That’s what I battle constantly. It angers me, because society, all the commercials, even counselors and advisors from college say that degrees equate to money. And the more money you make, the more things you can buy. The more things you can buy, the happier you’ll be. So, why am I standing outside of my five-million-dollar mansion with no desire to go inside? Why am I not happy?

<ping>

My phone dings. It’s a text message. I pull it from my sports jacket and look at it. It’s from Quintessa. I read her message.

**Quintessa:** Sorry to bother you this late on a Saturday night, but something has been bothering me and I need an answer. Did you leave a jacket on my car Friday afternoon?

I consider not responding at all. I’m not much in the mood to talk, even to her. And what’s it to her whether I left the jacket. If you need a jacket, you need a jacket. I text back:

**Essex:** You shouldn't be contacting me after work hours. You shouldn't be contacting me at all.

**Quintessa:** You shouldn't be leaving gifts on my car.

**Essex:** I wouldn't have if you could afford one yourself.

**Quintessa:** I didn't ask you to buy me a jacket.

**Essex:** You're welcome.

**Quintessa:** I don't want it. I'll leave it on your car tomorrow.

**Essex:** And if you do, you and I are going to have a problem.

**Quintessa:** What kind of problem???

**Essex:** The kind you don't want.

I shake my head and put my phone away. Part of my persona is being a man who doesn't need anything from anyone. But I need something from her and that scares me. That's one of the reasons why my heart is doing a tug-of-war with Quintessa. I want her, but I don't want her to know how *much* I want her. And then there's the fact that she hurt me all those years ago. Men do not handle or process pain as well as people think they do. We suppress a lot of it, which ends up creating other problems that shift the person we *hope* to become into someone we no longer recognize.

# Chapter 13

Quintessa



Three weeks later and I'm still here at DePaul & Company. I didn't think I'd make it, but here I am, walking into the building feeling like a regular ol' employee. I bought some new clothes, but that new-hire smell – yeah, it has officially left me. I'm one of *them* now and I think I've done a good job of falling in line. Since I made the mistake of texting Mr. DePaul three weeks ago about that jacket, I haven't heard a word from him or seen him in the parking lot, the office or the café. He's canceled our Tuesday team meetings three weeks in a row. It's like the stars aligned and everything is working in my favor. That's probably because I took Zahara's advice, kept my head down, handled my work and bounced. Get in, get out.

I walk to my desk and set my coffee thermos next to my keyboard. I lower my purse to the floor.

“What up, Tez,” Jake says.

Weeks ago, when Zahara had told me about the nicknames for the group, I decided then and there that I wouldn't use them. But, since everyone started calling me *Tez*, I call them by their group-assigned nickname on occasion.

“Good morning, Bieber,” I respond. “How are you?”

“Chillin'. You know me.”

“Yo!” Mauve says, walking to her desk with a green smoothie. She usually has one every morning.

“Good morning, Rockstar,” I tell her.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...good morning,” she drawls. “Another day, another dollar.”

Zahara, Greta and Ian walk in together. Over the last couple of weeks, I’ve noticed that Zahara is not a morning person. She doesn’t like talking until she’s two cups of coffee in. Ian is the quiet one. He’s a perfectionist, so his time is spent staring at the computer screen, going over every return with a fine-tooth comb. Greta doesn’t talk much either, but that’s because she’s the manager and strives to maintain a relationship with us to where we know *she’s* the boss and not our work friend.

We settle at our desks. I’ve been maintaining addresses for our clients and fixing file discrepancies. I haven’t worked on any tax returns yet or had any one-on-ones with clients. Greta says that usually happens after a month, so I have another week or so for that. For now, I do minor work and shadow my coworkers in the afternoons. Today after lunch, I’ll be shadowing Ian.

After a few sips of coffee and a silent mantra to prepare myself for another day of work, I stare down at the spreadsheet and compare it to the address information on file for this customer. For some reason, they didn’t use DePaul & Company to prepare their taxes last year (if they filed at all), so I have to send them a letter, reminding past customers that it’s time to file and hopefully, they’ll return to the firm. It’s a way of reminding them of our services and their tax obligation.

The letter I send is a form letter, so all I do is type the person’s address. I’m midway doing that right now when I get a ping from Zahara via the interoffice messaging app on our computers.

**Zahara to Quintessa:** code red, code red!

**Mauve to Quintessa:** code red, newbie. There goes our chill Monday...  
<skull emoji>

**Ian to Quintessa:** code red. let the purge begin!

**Jake to Quintessa:** code red...welcome to the circus

**Greta to Team:** Code red. Do your job and stay focused.

Oh no.

Code red means Mr. DePaul is on our floor. I instantly feel my body seize up like my immune system is forming this outer shield to protect me from the fire-breathing dragon who's lurking, ready to set someone ablaze. I start panic-typing to Zahara.

**Quintessa to Zahara:** Zee, why is he here? u hear anything?

**Zahara to Quintessa:** nope.

**Quintessa to Zahara:** why is Ian saying something about a purge?

**Zahara to Quintessa:** lol... 'cause he's a nerd. Don't listen to Ian. This is the most excitement he's had in a long time. Just give it a few minutes and the dictator will be gone. And make sure your drink isn't too close to your keyboard. He doesn't like that at all...

When I was first hired, Zahara told me Mr. DePaul's visits to the floor were rare. Mauve told me just last week that the last time she could remember Mr. DePaul coming down here was like two months ago. Why is he here now? Is somebody about to get fired? Am *I* about to get fired?

It's so quiet in my area, I can hear his expensive, Italian leather shoes as they get closer and closer to our department.

*Jeez, please bypass us.*

I try to focus on work and pretend nothing's amiss, but it's hard to work when a warlord is standing over your shoulder. What kind of toxic work environment is this? When did it become acceptable in the corporate world to be afraid of the CEO or anyone else in management? And I'm not talking afraid like you're about to get fired. I'm talking afraid as in *afraid for your life*.

I decide to message Zahara back.

**Quintessa to Zahara:** ugh...I can't concentrate

**Zahara to Quintessa:** trust me, nobody can. btw, looks like he's heading to Greta's desk.

**Quintessa to Zahara:** is Greta about to get canned?

**Zahara to Quintessa:** I doubt it, but we'll find out for sure in a minute.

Our cubicles are set up open-style where we can see each other. There are no privacy walls – everyone is exposed. I sit directly behind Greta, then Mauve is behind me. Zahara's at

the back. Ian and Jake are across from us, and there's an empty cubicle in their row.

I'm looking at the computer screen when, out of my peripherals, I see Mr. DePaul walk up to Greta's desk. He tells her:

"I need to see you and your entire team in the conference room."

"Sure, Mr. DePaul," Greta says. "We'll be right there."

He walks that way, leaving a trail of his intoxicating cologne behind. The man smells good, but his attitude stinks. The imbalance is confusing.

Greta says, "Alright, guys. You heard him. Let's go."

"A meeting on a Monday morning?" Jake says. "We're all about to get pink slips. I can feel it."

"Ugh...shut up, Bieber," Mauve says.

"What's going on, Greta?" Zahara asks in a tizzy. "Why a sudden meeting request?"

"I don't know. He didn't give me a heads up about this, so I guess we're all going to find out at the same time."

"It's starting..." Ian says, pushing his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose, his eyes appearing twice their original size through his thick spectacles. "That three-week hiatus Mr. DePaul took was a prelude to this very moment. I'm so glad I took the time to re-do my resume."

"Y'all get it together," Greta says. "Ain't nobody getting fired. And we can't be walking up in this conference room in discord."

"Should we bring our laptops?" Zahara asks.

"I'm not sure, so bring them just in case."

We grab our laptops and get into a single file line like we're kids leaving the classroom, taking our weekly trip to the media center to check out books.



As we file into the room and take our seats, Mr. DePaul is standing at a wall of windows with his back toward us. His hands are locked together behind his back as well. I can't tell what kind of mood he's in. Is he annoyed? Maybe. He's always such a grouch.

When he hears the door close, he turns around and looks at us – all of us – before his eyes land on me like a private jet descending onto a small, uninhabited island. He stares long enough for me to surmise it's intentional. As always, he's looking dapper in a dark blue suit. The room smells like him. I try not to associate that cologne with him, but it's too late. That's his signature smell.

He says, "Fifty returns a week. It's a simple goal. A more aggressive one would be seventy-five to a hundred, but for the last five years, it's been hovering around forty. I want that number brought up to seventy-five. Mrs. Wilburn, what challenges will this pose to your team?"

Greta looks dumbfounded. She says, "With all due respect, Mr. DePaul, you're already aware of my team's limitations. We—"

"You asked for a new hire. I gave you one," he says, cutting her off in pure Essex DePaul fashion.

He glances over at me. I pretend not to see him.

Greta says, "Surely, you're not expecting Quintessa to start working one-on-one with clients after only being here for a little over three weeks. She's still training, which includes shadowing the rest of the team."

"She doesn't need all that training. She knows how to do returns. Right, Ms. Bailey?"

I guess it's my turn to speak. I say, "Yes, I do, but I don't want to rush it, especially if Greta is not ready for me to get my feet wet just yet."

"Your feet? Your whole *body* should've been wet a week ago. I'm thoroughly displeased that you haven't been doing what I hired you to do."

"I've been maintaining addresses and—"

“That sounds like a bunch of boondoggling to me.”

Before I can ask him what *boondoggling* means, Greta says, “She’s doing good. She’s learning the client profiles and—”

“And yet we’re stagnant at forty lousy returns a week. That’s ludicrous. Let me ask you something, Mrs. Wilburn. What would be the point of this company spending millions of dollars on advertisements to get people to trust DePaul & Company with their taxes if my team can’t handle them? And what really irks me is, all your team does is the basics. You put the file together, do the simple part of the return and send it to the level two associates for a more in-depth look. What’s so difficult about that?”

I look at Zahara. She’s twirling her pen. Ian has his chin propped up on his balled fist while his elbow rests on the table. Jake is lounging in his chair like he doesn’t care if he gets fired or not. And Mauve – she’s in the room, but she’s really not in the room. She has a way of checking out, probably for the sake of her sanity. I wish I had that ability.

Greta is still trying to maintain some level of professionalism with Mr. DePaul, but how do you reason with an unreasonable person? She says, “With four team members who are up to speed—”

“You’re averaging forty returns a month, which is how many per associate? Do some quick math. How many is that, Ms. Wellenski, or are the zippers on your jacket more important than what we’re discussing here?”

“Ten,” Mauve drawls out. I guess she wasn’t checked out after all.

“Yes. Ten,” the Dictator continues. “This is the ridiculous amount of work you all do every week.”

By this point, Greta’s had enough. Her face is flushed when she responds, “Mr. DePaul, that’s absurd, and you know it.”

“What I know is, I need these numbers up,” he says belligerently. “You’re the leader of this team, Ms. Wilburn. If you can’t find a way to make that happen, I’ll find someone who can. The floor is open for suggestions if any of you have

ideas. Ms. Valentine? Zelenski? Fitzgerald? Wellenski? Bailey?"

Nobody says a word after he tosses out everyone's surnames like Donald Trump was *throwing* rolls of paper towels to people in need. I glance over at Greta. She's fuming mad but tries not to show it. He's gon' mess around and give her a heart attack.

"No one has anything to offer?" Mr. DePaul says, taking antagonizing steps back and forth by the table with his hands still behind his back. "This is why I've canceled your team meetings for the last few weeks. I was hoping without that break in your day, you'd accomplish more, but even *that* didn't work. So, until I can come up with a plan, especially since no one here has anything to offer, go back to your desks and get some work done."

The moment my butt leaves the soft cushioned chair, he says, "Ms. Bailey, I need you to hang back for a minute."

*Unbelievable. And to think I almost made it out unscathed...*

At this stage, what would be the point of him asking *me* to stay behind and chat with him while dismissing everyone else? It's so embarrassing because I know what they're all thinking. All I can say is if I *am* about to get fired, so be it. It would probably be a blessing.

# Chapter 14

Essex



After Greta and her team file out of the room, I take a seat directly across the table from Quintessa. I stare, but she's not entertaining my gaze. She's not looking at me at all. It's like I'm not even here. She doesn't know how much that irritates me.

I purposely stayed away from her, and by default, the entire team, for three weeks to give her time to settle into her new role. Besides, I had to come up with a plan to deal with her professionally without the personal issues I have with her getting in the way. Was that enough time to allow me to do that?

Hardly.

My purpose for meeting with the team, however, was valid. I know Mrs. Wilburn's team is working as hard as they can. I also know the ratio of returns to tax associates is right where it needs to be and if I expect higher numbers, I need to hire at least three people to add to Mrs. Wilburn's team. The numbers are a concern, but not so much that I'm willing to hire three more people at this time.

I clear my throat and lean back in my chair. In a way, I'm hoping that something about me will trigger Quintessa's memory and let her know who I am. Being that I look so different, it's a long shot, but my eyes are the same. I wonder if she sees anything in them.

Silence fills the room and adds distance between us. She looks up at me, her eyes slamming into mine, and while we hold each other's vision, confusion appears on her delicate, beautiful face. She breaks the silence by asking, "Why am I here?"

I close my eyes. I guess it was wishful thinking on my part for wanting her to recognize me. Now, I have to be this person – the man she despises.

I say, "I expected more out of you, Ms. Bailey."

"Excuse me?"

"I won't repeat what I just said. I know you heard me."

"I don't want you to repeat it," she says, her eyes flaring with annoyance. "I'm just wondering what you're talking about."

"You just sat here and heard the discussion I had with Mrs. Wilburn. I want numbers. The team—*your* team—isn't delivering, even after I hired you. Was hiring you a mistake?"

I study her intently to observe every wrinkle in her forehead, the twitch of her jaw, and the way she rolls her eyes. I commit it all to memory.

She responds, "You know what...at this point, that's for you to determine, Mr. DePaul."

"Is that right?" I ask.

"Yeah, that's right."

"In that case, I'm thinking it was a mistake."

"Based on what?"

"Your department's numbers."

"That has nothing to do with me. I haven't been here long enough to have an impact on those numbers. I'm *doing* my job. Greta is my manager. She gives me assignments. I can't go above her head and force her to give me clients. You put her in charge of the department for a reason and, therefore, you should trust her to make good decisions."

“Or *you* could be a little more assertive and tell her to give you some clients. It’s not like you don’t know how to do the work.”

“Of course I know how to do the work!”

“Then what are you waiting for? A sign from heaven?”

She sighs. “Again, I’m *not* the manager, and I don’t know what you’re expecting of me.”

“I told you what—”

“Then maybe—”

“Do not cut me off while I’m speaking!” I say demandingly.

Her eyes narrow to slits. “But it’s okay for you to cut me off?”

She has a mouth on her, but I’m the captain of this ship. She’s a passenger who needs to learn how to stay in her place. I continue, “I told you what my expectations were. Talk to Mrs. Wilburn and tell her to give you some clients.”

She shakes her head like I’m asking her to do something farfetched. “Are you done talking? I’d *hate* to interrupt you and get yelled at.”

I tap my fingertips on the table. It’s quite impressive how this woman gets my blood boiling. Yet and still, I’m up for the challenge – down for anything where she’s concerned. I tell her, “You have a smart mouth.”

“And it pales in comparison to yours. Are we done here?”

I don’t respond – just look at her in pure wonderment. She’s as beautiful as she was back in high school – when I was the guy who was surprised that a girl like *her* would say a word to me. I thought it was a joke. A prank. But her actions were genuine. Since then, she’s grown into a woman – a strong black woman – the kind I need by my side. Her features have matured – her cheeks, her nose, and her lips that beckon and vex me daily. And her curves – she’s not all skin and bones like she used to be. She has the body of a goddess. High school Quintessa is a distant memory. Her voice isn’t the

same, but I love the sound of this new one, especially when she's not ticked off at me.

"May I please leave, or was there anything further you wanted to discuss?" she asks respectfully and facetiously – a feat I don't think anyone else can accomplish but her.

"We're done here," I tell her.

She immediately stands, showing off the black pantsuit she's wearing with a red blouse beneath the jacket. Looks nice on her.

I say, "Before you go, are there any concerns you'd like to address?"

She turns around and says, "No."

"Remember to pull the door this time."

She snatches it open aggressively and leaves. I think I may have pissed her off. At least, she didn't break a heel this time.

# Chapter 15

Quintessa



Still fuming beyond the point of consolation, I skip lunch in the café to go outside and clear my head of *him*. I pull air willfully into my nostrils to wash away the smell of his cologne and soak up some spring sunshine. It's a little windy today, seventy-eight degrees. A perfect blue sky. I can't let this bad-mannered man ruin this perfect day God has given me.

So, I don't.

After taking a lap around the parking lot, I drive to a nearby restaurant called The Sandbar – a place popular among tourists. I order coconut shrimp, plain fried shrimp and fries. I sit outside where I can still feel the breeze and enjoy the sun. I'm a tourist for the next forty-five minutes.

“Ah, this feels nice,” I say, sipping on a virgin strawberry margarita while waiting for my food. I rock to the beat of island music drifting through the speakers and shift my focus away from DePaul & Company to myself. My life. Since receiving my first paycheck a week ago, I have enough money for the first month and a deposit on a place.

*Hallelujah!*

Now, it's just a matter of finding somewhere to live. Ella is searching for me since I refuse to be on the computer during company time doing anything other than work-related stuff. Mr. DePaul is already breathing down my throat. I don't want to give him ammunition to call a meeting with me to go over the company's Internet policy. And I've thought about quitting



so many times, but that first paycheck was looking too nice to just walk away from. So, I told myself I would focus on work and my team, but it feels like every time I have an encounter with Mr. DePaul, it knocks me off track.

I digress.

While it's a big part of living, there's more to life than the company I work for. I think about my new start, about having my own place for the first time in a *long* time. I've imagined how I would decorate it so it's an oasis – my private haven from the storm. A place I can rest after work.

I take a sip of margarita and look at my phone when I hear the voice of my nemesis say, "It's too early to be drinking alcohol, isn't it?"

*You have got to be kidding me...*

Mr. DePaul is approaching my table, looking at me like we had lunch plans and he's running late. He has on a pair of dark-tinted sunglasses – I bet they cost a fortune – and he ditched the fancy suit-jacket to rock a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

He pulls the chair across from me, instantly making me feel dizzy with something related to anger. I'm more befuddled than anything else when it comes to this man. Why does he insist on bothering me?

At this point, I think I've developed an automatic frown anytime I'm near him. I ask, "What are you doing here?"

"Lunch. I eat here every Monday."

"No, you don't. You hardly leave your office on Mondays."

He flashes a satisfying smirk. "How do you know that?"

"I just know."

"Well, you're partly right. I do eat here every Monday, but I have Ms. Davison pick it up for me."

"Except today, huh?"

"Yeah. I felt like getting out today for lunch."

“Well, don’t let me hold you up,” I say so he can bounce. “I’m sure you’re meeting up with someone.”

“I’m not. If you don’t mind, I’d like to eat right here. With you.”

*Oh, I mind, all right! Why don’t you mind your business and leave me alone? I came over here to get away from you, and now, here you are. Why me? Why?*

“Quintessa,” he says, my name rolling off his tongue naturally like it’s lived there when he calls no one by their first names. Everyone is either Mr., Mrs., or Ms. Today, I’m *Quintessa*.

I look up at him, wanting so badly to stand up to him, but something’s holding me back. Then I think of all the insults I’ve had to endure. Just this morning, he pretty much told me I was inept at my job. That he expected more out of me. Now he wants to invade my alone time with his presence. I don’t get it.

I sneer impatiently and say, “Fine. You can sit there, but I’m not going to listen to you disparage me. In fact, I don’t want to hear anything about work. I came here to get away from work.”

“Fine. No work talk,” he responds. He looks utterly pleased and satisfied – doesn’t have a care in the world.

I’m the exact opposite. I say, “I don’t know why you want to sit here, anyway. I didn’t think you had lunch with the peasants.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. DePaul,” the waitress says all bubbly like the sight of him has made her day. “Will you be having the usual?”

“I will, Sarah. Thank you.”

She looks at me and says, “And yours will be right out.”

“Okay. Thank y—”

“Why don’t you bring them out at the same time, Sarah, since we’re dining together,” Mr. DePaul offers.

My mouth falls open. Now he’s dictating when I eat.

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

I say, “Are you kidding me? I’ve been here for ten minutes already. You’re going to make me late getting back to the office.”

He loosens his tie and tells me, “Woman, I pay you double what that position calls for. Do you really think I care about what time you’re back at your desk?”

“I don’t report to *you*. I report to Greta.”

“And she reports to me. Oh, and by the way, you’re not a peasant. Don’t make those kinds of comments to me about yourself.”

“I was speaking in general.”

“I don’t care how you were speaking. I never want to hear you say anything like that to me again.”

“O-kay...I’m not about to do this with you.” I stand up with my keys in hand.

“Sit down,” he says.

I take my keys from the table and my purse from the chair closest to me and throw the strap up on my shoulder.

“Sit down, Tessie.”

I freeze and look at him. Did I hear him correctly? No one has called me Tessie in quite some time. What on earth would possess him to call me *Tessie* after all the nicknames one could derive from my name? There’s Quin, my normal nickname, Tess, Tessa and my work nickname, Tez. But Tessie? Did I hear him correctly? Seeking clarification, I ask, “What did you just call me?”

“Sit down, please. You shouldn’t leave because of me.”

“Mr. DePaul, I have to deal with this back-and-forth with you at work. This is *my* time, and I don’t want to be stressed out by you or anyone else. So—”

“Just sit down. Please.”

I’m still ready to bounce.

He says, “Please.”

I sit down. My purse is on my lap in case I decide to make a quick run for it. Everything in me wants to find another table.

He asks, “What can I do to ensure you won’t go running off.”

“You can watch your mouth, first of all.”

“And what does that entail?”

“I don’t have to tell you. You already know.”

“Perhaps I don’t if I’m asking you.”

I don’t know if he’s trying to get a rise out of me, yet again, or what, but judging by his mannerisms, maybe he’s clueless how he treats people. But how can that be?

I tell him, “You talk to people—me—in a very condescending way. You treat people like they’re beneath you because of who you are. I get it – you’re rich – you have it all—everybody knows that. You don’t have to make us feel *less than* because we don’t have what you have.”

“That’s not my intention. It’s just the way I talk.”

I shake my head. I’m not accepting that answer.

“So, it’s normal for you to tell grown people to ‘be quiet’ and ‘sit down’. That’s how you talk to children, not adults.”

“Fine. I’ll play by your rules outside of the office.”

*And he still doesn’t get it...*

Even inside the building, he shouldn’t be talking to people like that.

“Can you smile now?” he asks.

I frown instead.

“Here we are,” the waitress says, bringing over our entrees. She lowers both plates to the table at the same time, and what do you know? Mr. DePaul’s *usual* is exactly what I ordered – coconut shrimp, regular fried shrimp and fries.

“Isn’t that a coincidence? We have similar tastes.”

“Yeah. That’s surprising. I would’ve expected you to be a caviar and calamari type of guy.”

Short of an eye roll, I say, “So stereotypical. I don’t like either,” he says, holding a coconut shrimp by the tail and taking the edible piece into his mouth.

While I eat, I discreetly watch him eat. He’s so thorough – doesn’t leave anything behind but the tails. And he doesn’t like ketchup on his fries. He eats them plain.

He smirks. “Are you just going to watch me eat or—?”

“I wasn’t watching you,” I respond, shamefaced.

“Sure you weren’t.”

“How about we don’t talk and just eat?” I suggest.

“If that’s what you want, but it’s going to be awkward, don’t you think?”

I glance up at him again. He has a sly smirk on his face. He knows exactly what he’s doing, which makes me believe this was no coincidence. But how did he know where I was going for lunch?

He eats more of his fries. I try to make myself eat because I am hungry, but now that he’s sitting here, I feel like I can’t stomach the food. Instead, his energy is pulling my attention across the table and once it’s there, my eyes trace the shape of his lips and the edges of the beard that suits his face so well. Dang, he’s hot. I pick up my innocent margarita and take a sip to cool off. Mr. DePaul is so outrageously handsome, the women sitting around us are staring at him like he’s a piece of chocolate. He may as well be with his delectable skin tone and dark hair. If they only knew the man he was on the inside. *Ugh...*

It’s the inside that needed massive amounts of work.

I say, “This is interesting.”

“What is?” he asks.

“If it’s not about work, you don’t have much to talk about.”

“That’s how it is when you’re the CEO. My life is my company.”

“And you don’t see anything wrong with that?” What I wanted to say was perhaps that’s why you got a stick up your butt.

“Why would I? It’s who I am.”

“There’s more to life than work, work, and more work.”

“You sound like my mother.”

*Mother.* I want to ask him if he’s close to his parents and all that – normal things, but nothing about us having lunch together is normal. He’s the CEO of the company I work for. He’s my boss’s boss. I ain’t asking him anything personal. I don’t want to be on that level with him.

“And you shouldn’t drink in the middle of the day,” he tells me. “You’ll mess around and screw up somebody’s taxes.”

“I’m not doing taxes yet, remember? You just tore me a new one about it in the conference room earlier.”

“Right.” He smiles.

It’s beautiful.

Devious and beautiful.

His smile changes everything about his aura. It makes you think he’s a good *human*. I’m sure that’s why he doesn’t do it often. The only times I’ve seen him smile are before or after he’s done something evil.

“Just so you’re not bringing it up later to make me look bad, it’s a virgin margarita.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying. What reason do I have to lie?”

“Easy. Your boss caught you drinking on the job.”

“I’m not on the job. I’m out to lunch.”

He shakes his head. “After five o’clock, you do what you want. Between the hours of eight to five, you’re mine.”

I dart my head back. I know what he means, but he put a little too much emphasis on the *you're mine* part of his explanation.

“And what grown woman orders a virgin margarita?”

“One who’s not a drinker like that and don’t mind it.”

He reaches across the table, picks up my glass and takes a sip.

I’m too appalled to react right away. The nerve of this guy. Did he really just...?

“Um, excuse me! How are you just going to put your mouth on my drink?”

“I had to see if you were telling me the truth.”

“You should’ve just believed me.”

“Should have, huh?” He picks up my glass a second time and goes in for another sip – a longer one this time. “Ahh,” he says, his thirst quenched by way of *my* drink. Meanwhile, his water is sitting there untouched.

Eyes narrowed, I say, “You have a lot of nerve.”

He pulls his glasses from his face and sets them on the table. “I know. By the way, that ain’t bad. Are you going to drink the rest of it?”

“Are you seriously trying to hijack my drink?”

“I mean, you’re just sitting there nursing the thing. If you’re going to drink it, *drink it.*”

“I can tell you the same thing about that water. All the ice done melted and you’re worrying about my drink.”

He smirks again. “You know what I like about you, Tessie.”

“Stop calling me that like we’re friends. We’re not friends, Mr. DePaul.”

As if he didn’t hear a word I just said, he repeats, “You know what I like about you, Tessie?”

This time when he says *Tessie*, it takes me back to a boy in high school who had a crush on me. I liked him too, but I felt

like he needed more of a friend than a girlfriend back then. He was troubled. Kids used to pick on him all the time. He was the only one in my circle who called me Tessie.

“I said don’t call me that. It’s not for you and it’s not appropriate, especially since I have to call you *Mr. DePaul*.”

“You can call me by my first name if you would like.”

“No, I would *not* like.” I glance at my watch. What I would *like* to do is get out of here. I have ten minutes left on my break and I need to spend them getting my bearings to get back in the mindset to work. After having lunch with Mr. DePaul, I feel like I’ve cheated on my team with the enemy. As a matter of fact, that’s exactly what happened. But it wasn’t my fault. I don’t know if I should mention anything to Zahara about it or not. She’d probably never speak to me again. I can see Ian looking at me all skeptically through the lenses of his glasses. Mauve would roll her eyes and shun me. I have no idea what Greta would think or how she’d react, but it probably won’t be good.

Yeah, I think I’ll keep this one to myself...

I stand up, then dig my wallet out of my purse.

Mr. DePaul stands, too, patting his backside for his wallet, towering over me like a tree blocking my sunlight. “Great. Seems I’ve left my wallet.”

*The millionaire has left his wallet...*

“No worries. Lunch is on me.” I take out enough money to cover both of our meals and place it on the table. “And I have to go. Bye.” I walk so fast to my car, I feel like I have propellers behind me. I didn’t know how to say bye to him, especially since we’re going to the same place, except he’s going to the twelfth floor while I’m on six. And another thing...I didn’t want to give him the impression that I wanted to be his friend just because I paid for his meal. I would’ve done anything to get away from him. Paying wasn’t a friendly gesture. It was more of a survival mechanism.

When I pull the door handle to get in my car, I hear Essex say, “Hey.”



I nearly jumped out of my shoes. I didn't think he was behind me. I left him at the table and now, he's caught up to me. I can't get away from this guy!

"Um, yes?"

"I'm going to ride back with you over there."

My eyes narrow. "You're *going* to ride back with me. You didn't ask—you're telling me what you're *going* to do."

"Okay, let me try this again. May I have a ride back to the building with you, Quintessa?"

"Who do I look like? Uber?"

He flashes a smile with enlivened eyes that look as pleasing. It's like doves being released at a wedding, or watching a sunrise and being drenched in a feeling of complete awe. It puts me in a tailspin, temporarily making me forget what day it is.

I blink out of a stupor and say, "Where's your *driver*?"

"I don't know. Are you going to give me a ride or not?"

"I suppose, but don't be alarmed. My car is a far cry from that Maybach that takes you around the city."

"I'm just trying to get back to the building. I'm not judging your car." He slides his sunglasses back on.

I hold in a sigh and say, "Okay, well, get in."

I sit in the driver's seat while he opens the passenger door and takes some items out of the passenger seat – a brush, deodorant, hairspray and a T-shirt.

I'm too numb to be embarrassed. I say, "Just rake all that junk on the floor."

He sets the items on the backseat instead, commenting about all the stuff I have back there. "Looks like you live out of your car."

"Partially. When you live with your best friend but desperately need your own place, this is what you get."

Trying to fit his long legs inside before he closes the door, he says, “That blonde girl—she’s your friend?”

“Yes.”

He adjusts the seat so it’s as far back as it will go and still, there isn’t enough room for those legs. He shuts the door. “I talked to her briefly when I was looking for you. I don’t think she liked me very much.”

“That shouldn’t surprise you. No one likes you that much.”

He grins. “I guess not.”

We pull into the parking lot. I say, “I’ll drop you off at the door.”

“No, you can park. I have no problem walking.”

“Ah, I get it. You don’t want to be seen getting out of my car. I didn’t think it was *that* bad.”

“No, that’s not it at all. I just don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“It’s no inconvenience. Besides, I can’t be seen walking with you. I’d lose my street cred.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.” I pull up in front of the building and say, “Here you are.”

“Thank you, Quintessa. I owe you big time.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” I say quickly to dispel any chance of this ever happening again. “We can just call it even. You already bought me a jacket.”

“I never confirmed that.”

“You didn’t have to *confirm* it. That jacket is worth more than my car. Who else bought it?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Maybe you have an admirer out there who thinks you’re worth it.”

“Not likely.”

He rolls his sleeves back down, smoothing out the wrinkles in his shirt. He's very attentive to his grooming and appearance. "Why not? You don't think you're worth it?"

"Stop playing games, Mr. DePaul. I know you bought the jacket."

He flips the sun visor down to look into the mirror as he adjusts his necktie. A bunch of napkins comes raining down on him. He finds it comical. I cringe. Based on all this crap in my car, I'm sure the CEO now thinks I'm a slob.

"Sorry," I say. "No one usually rides with me."

After making sure his tie is perfect, he gathers the napkins and puts them back where they were, folding the visor back into its resting position. Pulling the door handle to get out, he says, "Thanks for the lift."

"It's no Maybach, but it'll get you from point A to point B, as long as I stay on top of the oil changes."

A grin comes to his face. "That's for sure."

He opens the door and finally, that lengthy body of his is outside. I'm sure it's a relief to stretch after being balled up like a pretzel.

He shuts the door and heads up the stairs.

Finally! I can breathe.

After a round of deep breaths, I say, "OMG...what was that?" I ride around the parking lot looking for a place to park. When I find one, I sit there for a moment to catch my breath. I can't believe Essex DePaul was in my car. *My* car! And I had lunch with the man!

I inhale a breath and push it out forcefully, willing myself to get out of this car and get back to my desk. As soon as my butt hits the chair, I get a ping from Zahara.

**Zahara to Quintessa:** girl! where have you been?

**Quintessa to Zahara:** I went to lunch

**Zahara to Quintessa:** omg! we thought the dictator fired you!

**Quintessa to Zahara:** why would you think that?

**Zahara to Quintessa:** because he let all of us go after the meeting and held you back

The meeting – I honestly had forgotten all about that after lunch and the ride back here with Mr. DePaul. I’m still reeling from that – nerves still on edge. I mean, what really happened at lunch? Did we...bond? No, we couldn’t have.

**Zahara to Quintessa:** so, you’re okay...everything’s cool?

**Quintessa to Zahara:** yeah. I’m good....’bout to sit with Ian for training

**Zahara to Quintessa:** he’s ready for you, too. Turn around and look at him

I swivel in my chair and see Ian staring at me. What was he doing? Staring at the back of my head, waiting for me to turn around so he could tell me he was ready? Yeah, that’s exactly what he did.

“I’ll be right there, Ian.”

“Alrighty, Aphrodite.”

**Quintessa to Zahara:** girl, let me go sit with him. We’ll chat later.

**Zahara to Quintessa:** lol...okay, Aphrodite. LMBO!

While still sitting in my chair, I roll over to Ian’s desk. He adjusts his glasses and says, “You’re right on time. I was just about to start on a return.”

“Great,” I respond with my pen in hand, ready to take notes, but as he’s talking, all I can think about is Mr. DePaul and how he had lunch with me. And he smiled – oh his smile – smiled more than I’ve ever seen him smile around here. And, surprisingly, he wasn’t bad to be around. Maybe it’s the building that has him uptight and wound up most of the time, but when he’s out of the office, he’s a different person. And he left the scent of his cologne in my car.

This has been a crazy day. It’s not over yet and I’m completely bewildered, yet there’s something exhilarating about Mr. DePaul’s presence in my day. There’s something oddly familiar about him. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but it’s something.

Whatever the case, I’m sure the lunch incident was just a one-time thing. I can’t see this ever happening again. That’s

not the culture around here. The higher-ups stay with the higher-ups, mid-level managers hang with each other and the little people stay with the little people. So, I try to forget about the day and focus on Ian as he walks me through how to do something I've done a million times before at my previous job – just with a different computer program.

# Chapter 16

Essex



I wasn't planning on having lunch at The Sandbar, but when I'm frustrated at work, I like to take walks. This particular walk led me to The Sandbar. Seeing Quintessa there was the icing on the cake. No, I didn't follow her. This was all a coincidence, or maybe it was fate. Okay, I won't take it that far. Still, I was elated to see her, though I did a good job of disguising it. And when I saw her, I felt the same flutter in my chest as I did when she stepped into the conference room for the interview – when, all those years ago, she helped me pick up my books when a group of guys pushed me down in the hallway. It was the first time we met. I'll never forget it. It's stained into my permanent memory. And she has those same bright, comforting deep brown eyes that I've missed so badly over the years.

I swivel around in my chair, and with my fingers laced behind my head, I peer outside. Having lunch with Quintessa today was the best thing that's happened to me in a long time. I want more time with her, but judging by the vibe I picked up, she doesn't want anything to do with me – probably because of who she perceives I am.

The tap at the door takes me out of my daze.

“Come in.”

I hear Ms. Davison say, “Mr. DePaul, they're waiting for you in the conference room.”

“Who's waiting for me?”

“The—uh—executives. They have the people from Walbridge on video conference. Did you not get my reminder about the meeting today?”

“I did, Ms. Davison. My mind was elsewhere.”

*And still is...*

*It's with Quintessa, at lunch sharing small talk.* Taking in the shape of her face. Her lips.

I push away from my desk, take the file I've been keeping on Walbridge and saunter to the conference room.

“Good afternoon, everyone. I hope you all are doing well this lovely afternoon.”

My executives, who are physically here, look at each other, puzzled.

Paul Walton, the CEO at Walbridge, whose face fills the conferencing screen, says, “Well, good afternoon, Mr. DePaul. Finally, we meet. You're not an easy guy to get ahold of.”

“That's business, Mr. Walton. I'm sure you know how it is.”

“All too well, my friend. All too well...”

“Now that we're all here, let's get right down to business, shall we?”

“We shall. Why don't you tell me what your company can do for Walbridge Industries?”

I say, “I'll be more than happy to. First, let me introduce everyone. Susan Musk heads up the Tax Department. Denise Zubar covers consulting. Linda May is over the Audit Department and Theodore Cruz handles Mergers and Acquisitions. These entities are not foreign to you, Mr. Walton. You're working with a tax agency now who can provide you with all of these, but do they have the skills—the technology to give you the best result every single time. Just to give you a little background, I started this company with a few thousand dollars in the bank. It took a lot of hard work and dedication to get to where I am today. I'm sure you know the grind and determination it takes to get to the top.”

“Oh, I know that all too well.”

“Then it’s of great importance to reward that hard work with a company who can ensure that not only are your taxes handled appropriately, but every business aspect of the financial piece of your company be looked at thoroughly and evaluated efficiently. You’ll find no firm better than DePaul & Company. I’ll have Mrs. Zubar give you an overview of what her department does. Mrs. Zubar, you have the floor.”

I take a step back and stand near the windows with my arms crossed.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Walton. My department provides consulting services, which include tax implications for whatever it is your company is trying to do financially or strategically. Let’s say you wanted to grow your workforce or build a second location on the other side of town. My department will be instrumental in giving you the best answers to produce sustainable results. No situation is too big or too small—we’re here to steer you in the right direction.”

Mrs. May says, “And I can jump in here and tell you our audit services are top tier. You always need to know what the state of your business is, so nothing catches you off guard. At any given time, we shed light on your business so you are free to propel future aspirations without having to worry about implications from past issues.”

Mr. Cruz chimes in to say, “And as head of Mergers and Acquisitions, I can tell you – no M&A deal is alike. If Walbridge Industries ever bought out another company, or if you were to merge with a company, my team is here to help you through the integration. This is what we do all day, every day, and I might add, we’re good at it.”

“And there you have it,” I say. “Before I hired all of these great people, I did all of this myself. Most of these things I learned in college, but I’m self-taught on much of it. With the number of clients we have now, there’s no way I can do it all alone, so these executives sitting here today are the backbone of this organization as well as the many other associates who work tirelessly making sure this ship floats. In 2022, this is the



place to be. Now, I'll open up the floor to you for comments or questions."

"I do not have any questions. I believe you've answered everything."

"Good. Feel free to give me a call if you think of something we didn't cover. I'm here to answer all of your questions."

"I will. Thank you," Mr. Walton says. "You sound like busy people. I'll let you get back to your duties."

I reach over to press the Telecom button, ending the conference call. I say, "Phenomenal job, team. I think that went exceptionally well."

No one says a word. They all sit there staring at me.

Mr. Cruz asks, "Are you feeling all right today, Mr. DePaul?"

Before I can answer, Mrs. Musk chuckles then says, "I was going to ask the same thing."

Mrs. Zubar and Mrs. May are snickering amongst themselves.

I say, "I'm doing great. Why do you ask?"

"Um..." Mrs. May begins. "You're usually not so—shall I say—*chipper*? This afternoon, you're like a new person—a far cry from how you were this morning."

I *am* in a much better mood this afternoon, coming off the high from my lunch date with Quintessa. She elevates my mood the way nothing else does. After all these years, I've never met a woman who could do what serotonin does to me. Imagine how difficult it must be for me to stay away from her. But, no matter how much I want her, no matter how happy she makes me, I can't let her see it, just like I won't let them know the reasons for my improved temperament.

I say, "It must be this opportunity. I'm always excited about the prospect of getting new business. More business equals more money, especially with Walbridge."

"You got that right," Mr. Cruz says.

“You all did a good job, and you’re free to carry on with your day,” I tell them, and I don’t wait for them to leave before I exit. I return to my office, close the door and stand behind it, amazed at what Quintessa is capable of doing to me. Part of it irritates me – that she has this hold on me – but what would I do with myself if she wasn’t here? I’d still be wondering, wishing and waiting for the chance to see her again, but thankfully, I don’t have to do that. She’s here – in my building, working for me. I can see her whenever I want.

I can feel her energy.

Admire her dark, espresso-colored eyes.

Smell her favorite sweet fragrances that I’ve committed to memory.

What irritates me at the moment is, I have no idea when I’ll see her again, and I’m not talking in passing at work. I want to spend a substantial amount of time with her and immerse myself in her life, so she knows my actions are intentional and that I want to be around her every chance I get.

# Chapter 17

Quintessa



Something is seriously wrong with the world – no I take that back – the United States – when a one-bedroom apartment costs more than a whole mortgage. Albeit the case, I need a place to stay, and I’m not at a place in my life where buying a home is practical. An apartment will have to do for now. I’ve been waiting for this moment for so long, I’m more than willing to fork over the \$1,500 rent easily. At least water comes included. It’s in Panama City, a few miles down the street from Ella, so that’s a bonus. Ella found this place for me – said she thought it suited me well. There’s an outdoor pool, a small gym and a pond where I can sit and unwind for the day, but the way alligators are around here, I’d be better off staying inside.

On Wednesday after work, me and Ella pulled up at Watercrest Apartments, took the tour and I fell in love with the place. They had several units available but only one on the third floor, which I snatched up. As a single woman, I think the third floor provides a level of extra security I need to feel safe. The only downside to that is, when I go shopping, I’d have two sets of stairs to traverse with my hands full of bags. I can feel my fingers going numb now just thinking about it.

Today, Saturday, I’m moving in! By moving in, I mean mostly moving my person. The only furniture I have is my bed and I don’t have a lot of clothes. The clothes I do have are enough to fit one thirteen-gallon trash bag. All my other stuff

– bed covers, bath towels and the like are in a few boxes. I’m starting from zero.

Ella tried to offer me some of her stuff, but what would I look like taking her furniture? She’s already fed and clothed me for months on end. I can’t take her furniture too.

My parents come over with snacks – Cheetos and diet Cokes. Mom makes it a point to tell me she’s too old to be moving boxes. My father hugs me, congratulating me on this step and telling me how he knew it would only be a matter of time before I got back on my feet. If only he knew what I had to endure to get to this point. We all have to endure something, right? As surely as we’re living, we will, so I should be proud of the struggle because it makes me appreciate what I have even more.

“What can your daddy do to help you out, dear?”

“Oh, Dad, can you set up my bed?”

“I sure can,” he says, walking the short distance down the hallway to the bedroom. My apartment is compact – much smaller than Ella’s. The kitchen and living rooms flow together. There is a space for a small dinette, which I will be getting, but that’s not up there on the priority list at the moment. I can eat while sitting on the couch, watching TV – all of which I don’t have either – but baby steps. I’ll get there, eventually. If I focus on what I *don’t* have, I won’t appreciate what I *do* have – a place to call home. My home.

I leave my parents at my apartment to go to Walmart with Ella. The goal is to pick up some items I have an immediate need for. I grab one of those three-drawer plastic carts to hold my undergarments and socks. I put a small microwave in the cart, too, and some microwaveable dinners along with some chips and other snacks. It’s not the most nutritious choice, but this will have to do for now.

When I’m back at the apartment, I tackle carrying the boxed microwave up two flights of stairs while Ella handles the plastic drawer cart. Ella sets the cart down to open the door and when she does, my arms grow so weak, the microwave falls out of my grasp and nearly lands on my right foot. My

eyes cannot believe what they're beholding. I'm doing everything in my power to convince myself this isn't happening.

But it is.

A casually dressed Essex DePaul is standing in *my* empty living room, talking to *my* parents. And he comes running over to me after I dropped the microwave like he's assumed the role of my personal savior.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I don't respond. I'm so taken aback, words are hung in my throat like a piece of food is lodged back there.

He says, "You need to be a bit more careful, Quintessa," as he picks up the microwave.

"I need to be—" Is this man telling *me* to be more careful like he belongs in my house? In my space? He's the reason I dropped the microwave! I want to scream. I want to tell him to get out, but I don't want to cause a scene in front of Mom and Dad. And I don't know what all Mr. DePaul has been up in here telling them.

He scrambles over to set the box on the counter in the kitchen, saying, "It could be damaged. I'll open it for you to make sure there's no damage. Even if there isn't, it should probably still be replaced."

"Um—timeout—," I tell him when my voice comes back. "I don't need you to do anything but step outside for a moment so I can speak with you in private."

"Sure, thing," he says, all blasé. His confidence is sickening. He has the nerve to speak to Ella as we exit, and he knows she doesn't like him.

Ella flashes a stiff smile and rolls her eyes.

I didn't tell Ella about the lunch incident on Monday, so she doesn't know I'm a tad bit more acquainted with Mr. DePaul than our initial, disastrous encounters. I purposely left that out, probably because *I* still can't believe it happened. If I told Ella about lunch, she'd draw some conclusions about it that I'm not

trying to hear right now. As it stands, she knows Mr. DePaul bought me a jacket. Now, he's here? While it may look suspect, I know he's not interested in me, though onlookers wouldn't be able to tell by the way he looks at me. Then again, he probably looks at all the women like that...

Like snacks.

I step outside, behind him, close the door and with my heart beating a mile a minute, I say behind clenched teeth, "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Why do you look so mean?" he asks. "I stopped by to see if you needed anything, Quintessa. Is this any way to treat your guest?"

I hold my head and massage my temples. It does nothing to stabilize me. Feeling dizzy, I ask, "What are you doing here, Mr. DePaul?"

"Essex," he says.

"Whatever. Just answer my question."

"Careful. I'm still your boss," he says, as if I need a reminder of that.

"You may be my boss, but presently, you're outside of *boss* jurisdiction. You're at my apartment and you still haven't told me why. Why are you here? How did you know I was here?"

"I was in employee records and saw you'd recently submitted a change of address. I figured you'd gotten a place and since nobody moves on a weekday, I thought I'd come by here today just to see if you were here, and here you are. By the way, your parents are extremely nice people. I think your father likes me."

With narrowed eyes, I say, "They don't. Nobody likes you."

The gleam in his eyes and the bright smile he flashes tell me he's not the least bit offended.

I say, "You need to go."

"Why do I need to go, Quintessa?"

“Because I’m asking you to. You’re my boss. We’re not—” I don’t want to say friends. That word should never be used anywhere near a tyrant, but I don’t know how else to put it.

“We’re not what?” he asks.

“Friends,” I blurt out.

“Well, we had lunch the other day that you paid for. I think that makes us *something*.”

“Something like what?”

“Friendly, but I think I like the idea of us being friends. Plus, your parents may be under the impression that we *might* be dating.”

I cover my face with my hands. “Oh, no. What have you done?”

“I didn’t do anything. I was just talking and they pretty much formed their own conclusions. Now, listen. I helped your father get your bed up and now I’m taking you to a late lunch.”

“You touched my bed?”

“I did. Now, let’s go. I’m taking you to lunch.”

“You’re not taking me anywhere.”

My neighbors walk by looking scared already and probably worried about who’s moving next door to them. I haven’t spent one night here and Mr. DePaul has got me bent out of shape while simultaneously ruining my reputation.

He smiles and responds, “Gee, and I thought I was stubborn...”

I pace the area in front of my door. I say, “You’re not supposed to be here, Mr. DePaul.”

“It’s Essex.”

“Ugh...just...leave.”

“Now you sound like me. *Demanding*.”

“I’m serious, Mr. DePaul.”

“I’m serious, too. I owe you a favor and I *will* be taking you to lunch. I already informed your parents of this. They’re about to leave.”

As soon as he says those words, Mom and Dad come walking out.

Mom says, “I see you got your hands full,” then waggles her brows at me and tries to wink but she’s blinking all crazy like she has a lash caught in her eye. “We’ll talk later, Quin.”

“Okay. Bye, Ma.”

I kiss her on the cheek, hug my father and then he shakes Mr. DePaul’s hand.

“It was a pleasure to meet you both,” Mr. DePaul tells them like he has manners when he and I both know he doesn’t.

“You as well, Essex,” Dad responds. He’s already on a first-name basis with my nemesis. Mr. DePaul may have them fooled, but I know the *real* man behind the expensive clothes and terribly handsome face.

When my parents are down the first flight of stairs, Mr. DePaul turns to me and says, “I’ve been fasting all day, waiting to eat with you. What are you in the mood for?”

Deciding to just avoid the nuisance in hopes *it* would go away, I turn away from him to go back inside, but as soon as I turn the doorknob, he gently grabs my right forearm. I snatch my arm away from him, frowning.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to take you to lunch,” he says evenly and with enough conviction that he has no doubt about what his plans are, whether they’re my plans or not. He’s *taking* me to lunch with or without my permission.

I stare up into his eyes for a moment, seemingly spellbound as I once again see something hidden in their depths. A feeling of nostalgia falls over me and has me remembering things that happened in my past. I’m talking about things from high school and college. This is weird. I don’t know what’s happening right now.



When I snatch my eyes away from his, I say, “Fine. Let’s go to lunch so I can get a few things straight with you, *sir*.”

“Lead the way.”

“Oh, I have to drive again, too?” I ask, jogging down the stairs.

“No. You can ride with me.”

When we get to the bottom of the stairs, I step aside, then I follow him to a black Mercedes with windows tinted so dark, you can’t see who’s inside. He opens the door. I get inside, sitting on a red leather seat, instantly feeling trapped.

He gets inside, starts the car and looks at me.

“What are you in the mood for?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I tell him, and it doesn’t. I’m just ready to get it over with.

“All right. Don’t complain about what I choose.”

Ignoring him, I take my phone and text Ella.

**Quintessa:** hey, El, sorry I had to leave. I’m with Mr. DePaul

**Ella:** what’s going on?

**Quintessa:** I’ll explain everything later.

**Ella:** You ditched me?

**Quintessa:** I didn’t ditch you. I’ll explain. Can you put the groceries away for me?

**Ella:** already done.

**Quintessa:** thanks, girl. I owe you big time. Just lock up before you leave.

**Ella:** okay

I put my phone away, and he’s already pulling up to a restaurant – Bayou on the Marina. I get out before he has a chance to open the door for me and we head inside. Per *his* request, we’re seated by windows that offer an amazing view of the marina. I stare out at the boats and turquoise-blue water.

He says, “You like the water?”

*Urgh....stop trying to find common ground with me...*

I tear my gaze away from the sun-kissed blue water and look at him. “Don’t all Floridians?”

“Not necessarily. Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Nice. I’ll have to take you out on my yacht one day.”

He doesn’t know this, but he ain’t taking me anywhere. I’m starting to think the CEO is missing a few critical screws. I’d take my chances on the Titanic before I step a foot on his yacht.

“Have you ever been here?” he asks.

“No.”

“I have. Once. May I suggest you try the shrimp tacos?”

“What if I don’t want the shrimp tacos?”

“Then don’t get them. I’m not trying to be authoritative. I was simply making a suggestion.”

“Fine,” I say, lowering the menu. “I’ll take your suggestion.”

He tells the waitress our orders. He orders a Bloody Mary. I opt for the Bayou Sunset – Rum, Grenadine, orange juice and Sprite – hoping it will help me make it through this.

The waitress walks away, and it’s just me and him. This place isn’t crawling with guests at three in the afternoon – the mid-point between lunch and dinner, so we’re pretty much seated in a spot where we have a decent amount of privacy.

I intentionally avoid eye contact with him when I say, “I want to know why you feel it’s appropriate to show up at my apartment like you belong there.”

Silence.

He doesn’t say a word, but I can feel him staring at me from across the table. I take out my phone just to have a distraction – something that would keep me from looking at him, but the heat he’s generating is making me flush. I need some...

“Here’s some water until your drinks arrive,” the waitress says.

*Right on time!*

I pick up the glass and chug water through the straw. While doing so, I make the mistake of glancing over at Mr. DePaul. He’s still staring.

Irritated by this nonsense, I look at him and say, “What are you doing?”

He smiles. “There you are. I was waiting for you to look at me.”

“Is that a job requirement?”

“We’re not at the job.”

“Exactly. Soooo...why did you come to my apartment today?”

“Because I wanted to see you.” He makes this slow, flicking motion with his middle finger and thumb like he’s plucking something, but there’s nothing there. And the look he gives me has me on fire. Never in my thirty-four years of living has a man ever looked at me with so much desire in his eyes. Or maybe I’m reading this thing all wrong. What’s desirable to a millionaire about a woman who can’t furnish her apartment until she gets her next couple of paychecks?

“You wanted to see me for what?”

He lifts a shoulder. “I just wanted to see you.”

I flush. My muscles twitch. A fluttering sensation runs across my stomach. Is he flirting with me?

The waitress returns with our drinks. I chug mine, hoping the alcohol will give me a hint of courage to say what I need to say to this man, but again, my words are lost as I watch him drink the Bloody Mary. And he has the nerve to bite one of the pieces of celery they used for garnishment, dip it in the drink and bite it again.

I must be frowning because, the next thing I know, he’s asking, “Why are you making that face?”

“Your drink...it looks absolutely disgusting. I wouldn't order anything with the word *blood* in the name.”

“That's because you're afraid to try new things. You need to live a little.”

“How do you know what I am? You don't know me. I started working for you like three weeks ago, and for the life of me, I can't figure out why you're infiltrating my life.”

“Infiltrating?” he says, stirring the drink with the celery and taking another bite like he has a drink and appetizer all in one. “How is taking you to lunch infiltrating your life?”

“Because you're always here.”

“Always?”

“Well, not always, but you just seem to pop up suddenly. Do you do this with all of your new hires? Particularly women?”

He takes another sip of the drink and I nearly gag at the sight of him doing so.

The waitress brings over the food and after she makes sure we're set, she tells us to enjoy our meals and goes about her business.

Mr. DePaul says, “No, I do not do this with all the new hires.” He takes a bite of a taco and moans. “Mmm...this is good.”

“Then what do you want from me?”

“Right now, I want you to eat. These tacos are delicious.”

*There he goes being bossy...*

I take a bite because I'm hungry and sweaty. I should've taken a shower after working in the apartment this morning, but *he* showed up and ruined my plans. I was going to have my first meal in my apartment, sitting in the middle of the living room floor beneath the ceiling fan, dreaming about what kind of sofa I wanted. I already knew the color scheme – just needed some couches to go with it. And curtains. Lamps. End tables. Rugs. The whole shebang.

I can't focus on that right now because he's here and these fish tacos *are* delicious! I don't think I've ever had any with so much flavor. So well-seasoned.

I glance over at Mr. DePaul and watch him obliterate his second taco. He eats like a caveman, but somehow he manages to be neat about it – taking his time to dab the corners of his mouth, sip his disgusting drink and repeat.

“Tell me about your parents,” he says, still avoiding my question on why he's doing what he's doing.

I ask, “What about them?”

“Are you close with them?”

“They're in their sixties and climbed two flights of stairs to see me get set up in my new apartment. Yes, we're close. What about your parents?”

“We were a lot closer when I was—” he pauses. I see a slight frown on his forehead when he continues, “When I was younger.”

I don't want to engage him any further regarding the frown or his past. I hate to pry. It's not my business to know anything about this man's relationship with his parents, but for some inexplicable reason, I feel like I want to know.

He says, “Life is never easy. We live from one day to the next, but we never know when it'll all end. It could be today. It could be tomorrow. It could be a month from now.”

I raise a brow. “This is too deep of a conversation to be having at lunch—or dinner—whatever this is.”

“You don't like deep conversations?” he asks, his eyes beseeching mine.

“I do—a lot better than small talk, but you just came out of left field with that one. Death is not a conversation anyone wants to have.”

“Right.” He sips water this time. “These tacos are good, eh?”

And there he goes again, bouncing around from one subject to the next, but at least he's off the subject of death.

"Yeah, they are." I wipe my mouth and say, "So, tell me the *real* reason you showed up at my apartment today."

He dabs the corners of his mouth with a napkin, looks at me, parts his lips to speak, then hesitates for a moment. Another grimace comes. He confesses, "I think I need your help."

I almost choke. I could not have heard him correctly. No way. Why is my mind deceiving me?

But he looks so serious...

Shaking my head, I reply, "There's no way the man who has *everything* needs me for *anything*. You can go on somewhere with that."

"Who says I have everything?"

"I do. Me." I point to myself for emphasis. "You own DePaul & Company. You wear brands I can't pronounce. Your driver chauffeurs you around in a *Maybach* for goodness sakes. And just the simple fact that you *have* a driver puts you in a class all on its own. So, tell me, Mr. DePaul...what can I do for you?"

"The first thing you can do is stop calling me *Mr. DePaul* when we're outside of work."

"But—"

"Please," he says, and it's not in a pleading way. It's more like a demand. "I have a reputation around the office—I'm aware of that. It's not necessarily good for business, but I just landed a deal with Walbridge Industries. I've been trying to work with that organization for years, but I could never seal the deal. After meeting with the CEO on Monday, he called me on Wednesday to say he was ready to work with the company. That was because of you."

"Congratulations, but I doubt if I had anything to do with that."

"You did. It was all you, Quintessa."

“How so?”

“Having lunch with you at the Sandbar—or maybe just being with you put me in a better headspace. So, here’s what I was thinking...I need you to be my eyes and ears around there.”

“Lemme stop you right there. I’m nobody’s snitch.”

“No, not like that. I mean it in the sense that you tell me when I’m being too authoritative and need to dial it back a notch. You may not believe this, but I don’t get off on people being afraid of me. That was never my intention when I became the man I am.”

“What was your intention?”

“To make money. To build a respectable business—one I could be proud of. One my parents could be proud of. I wanted to make something of myself because I—well, you get the picture. So, are you up for the task?”

“And what exactly am I supposed to be doing again?”

“Be my eyes and ears. Help me keep my temper under control. If I go postal in a situation you deem unnecessary, I want you to tell me.”

“Sounds like a setup for me to get fired.”

He grins. “It’s not. I won’t fire you.”

“I want it in writing.”

“You don’t need it in writing. I’m giving you my word.”

I think it over for a moment and say, “I shouldn’t do this. I’m in no position to be controlling your temper.”

“Well, you obviously have some sort of control over my psyche if you were able to brighten my mood before that meeting on Monday with Walbridge.”

“I don’t think I did anything to your mood.”

“Trust me, you did. Now, do we have a deal or what?”

How can I say no to those pleading eyes blazing upon me? I don’t know why he stares at me the way he does, but it’s

unnerving. “Yeah, okay. Deal, but I don’t want anyone else in the organization to know about this.”

“Then we’re on the same page because I don’t either. It’ll be our little secret. That way, you can keep talking about me behind my back with that Sahara Desert girl and no one will be none the wiser about our arrangement.”

“Her name is Zahara and nobody’s talking about you behind your back.”

“You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not,” I say, my cheeks burning to form into a smile that would expose that I am indeed lying.

He says, “You are. It’s written all over your beautiful face.” He picks up his glass and finishes the rest of his drink.

This guy...

He referred to me as beautiful when I know I look a hot mess, especially after running errands and working in my apartment for the better part of the day. I’m wearing cut-off jean shorts and a light grey T-shirt. My hair is thrown up in a ponytail. Dismissing his blandishment, I glance at my watch, stand up and say, “I have to get going.”

“Why?” he probes, checking his own watch for the time.

I tell him, “Well, I did just move. I have a few more things I want to get done before the day is over.”

“Right,” he says, leaning back in his chair, stretching his lengthy body before he stands. I can’t get enough of him in these casual clothes. The shirt he has on lays so well on top of those defined abdominals. With his hands extended in the air, his shirt rises, exposing the black Versace boxers he’s wearing beneath a pair of Givenchy jeans.

“I should be heading out, too. I have to visit my folks tomorrow.”

“Do they live around here?”

“They’re close. They live in Seacrest, where I live.”



He picks up the bill, pulls a brand new hundred-dollar bill from his wallet and places it in the billfold. Then we're out the door. That's when I remember I rode with him.

*Why did you do that, Quintessa? The man already called you beautiful. He admits he likes being around you just because and he looks at you with those dreamy eyes...now you gotta get back in this car with him...*

Like a gentleman, he opens the passenger door, lets me inside and when he gets in, he starts up the car, revs the engine and asks, "Where to?"

"Home," I tell him.

The AC is cranked up, blowing out that new car scent which blends with his cologne. Smells like money. I bet he gets an upgrade every year. The temperature is in the low eighties today, and the air feels good blowing in my face. I close my eyes and relax my muscles, soaking it all in. I'm quiet on the drive because I don't have much else to say and I still don't know what I've signed up for with him, but I guess it's too late to turn back now.

He pulls up in the parking lot, shuts off the engine and gets out. Why is he getting out?

"I'll walk you up," he tells me.

*Great. Just when I thought I was getting away from him...*

While we're climbing the stairs, he says, "Don't forget our deal."

*Our deal?*

I ask, "Oh, that reminds me—what do I get out of this deal?"

Starting up the second flight, he replies, "You get to talk to a baller whenever you get ready."

"Wow. So humble..."

Standing in front of my door now, keys in hand, I watch his eyes crinkle at the corners. I feel that fluttering sensation in

my stomach again. His good looks have me completely overawed and off my game.

Sliding his thumbs into his expensive jeans pockets, he asks, “Is there anything I can get you before I return home?”

“Home? It’s a Saturday and you’re going home?”

“I am.”

“I thought the *elite* met up with each other on the weekend, kee-kee’d over champagne and bragged about how much money they made in a single day.”

“That’s what they want you to think. I spend most of my Saturdays at home.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

I laugh. I know he’s lying. He *looks* like he’s lying. There’s just something about his face that’s not believable. But he doesn’t crack a smile. He’s serious, so I suppose I should stop laughing at him.

I clear my throat. That glass of water I didn’t drink at the restaurant would come in handy right about now.

“Congratulations on your place.”

“Thank you.”

“I look forward to working with you, Quintessa.” He extends his hand to me. I look at it, then look back up at him. Up until this point, I’d never touched any part of him *willingly*. The handshake during that terrible interview – that doesn’t count. I suppose this would be a do-over.

Reluctantly, I reach to capture his hand and when I do, I look up at him, making appropriate eye contact that has me catching my balance. Something inside of me sizzles when he squeezes my hands and that feeling of nostalgia takes over again – a feeling that somehow, I know this man. I tried to write it off before, but when it’s this potent, I can’t deny it. There’s something about Mr. DePaul – Essex – that’s familiar.

I pull my hand away from his and say, “Well, I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Yep.”

“Be on your best behavior.”

He grins wickedly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Bye,” I say unlocking the door.

“Bye,” he tells me after I step inside. I give him a wave before I close the door and he throws up a hand while backing away, then turns around and jogs down the stairs.

I close the door and breathe a sigh of relief. He’s gone. And now I have to sit here and think about what I’ve signed up for. I have no idea why I agreed to help him adjust his attitude, but I feel like I’ve shot myself in the foot. Mr. DePaul has a way about him, and that’s not going to change with any coaching on my part. Besides, when he’s at work, he’s a different person – a shark – and nobody’s getting away with anything.



My mother has been blowing up my phone since I arrived back at my apartment, almost like she knew the moment I returned. I call her back because if I don’t, I won’t hear the last of it.

“Hey, Quin,” she says, elation in her voice. I imagine she’s smiling.

“Hey, Ma. What did you think of the place?”

“It has potential. It’s like you’re just starting out and starting all over again.”

“Yeah, it is. You’d think I’d have myself together by now, right?”

“Don’t worry about that. Just be excited you get to enjoy a new space and have your own privacy. There’s a certain level of joy that comes with starting fresh and by the looks of things, you got yourself a man to help you out.”

And there it is...

I knew *he* would come up in this discussion. I say, “I knew you were thinking that, but Essex is not my man. He’s my boss, Ma.”

“Then you better make him your man. Do you know who that is, girl?”

“Yes, I—”

“That’s Essex DePaul, one of the richest men in this state!”

*Whoop de do...*

“Yeah, I know that. I told you, I work for him.”

“Honey, tell me something. How did you snag a man like him? You know he’s very smitten by you.”

“Please....the only thing he’s smitten by is cash.”

She chuckles.

I ask, “What exactly did he tell you and dad?”

“He was talking about how *glad* he was that you worked for the organization and his eyes just lit up when he told us all the good work you were doing there.”

*Yeah, I bet they did light up – just like they did when he went off on me and my team in that meeting.*

To clear things up with my mother, I say, “Well, don’t get the wrong idea, Ma. We’re not in any sort of relationship or anything.”

“Maybe not to you, but I think he has other plans.”

“Honey, come on with this food. I’m hungry,” I hear dad say in the background.

“Lord have mercy...there he goes. I swear he acts like he gon’ starve. Let me go. We’ll continue this conversation later.”

“There isn’t much to continue.”

“I’m sure there is. Bye. Love you, dear.”

“Love you, too, Ma.”

I hang up the phone and immediately dial Ella. She answers, “Oh, I see how it is. *Now* you call me after you’ve been running all over the city with yo’ man.”

I sit in the middle of the living room floor and lay back, staring up at the ceiling fan that somebody turned on low. Probably my mother. She stays complaining about how hot she is. I say, “Gosh...you sound like my mother. Why is it that every time a woman is seen with a man, he has to be *her* man?”

“Look—that man looked comfortable up in your apartment, talking to your parents. And I just want to know, how did you go from hating this guy to having lunch with him? And, did you tell him you were moving this weekend?”

“No. I didn’t tell him a thing. He just showed up.”

“That’s weird. Why would he pop up out of the blue?”

I sigh. I need this fan turned up a little higher as I reminisce about lunch and his hand touching mine. I say, “Okay, El, I haven’t been one-hundred percent transparent about what’s been going on with me and Essex.”

“Oh, it’s *Essex* now. Well, alrighty, then...”

“I—he told me to call him that and...” I sound suspect as I try to talk my way out of the hole I’m digging for myself. I try again, “Okay, so Monday, I was on my lunch break and I went to a restaurant near the job to decompress. Essex showed up. He wanted to eat with me, so he did, and he just started talking, so naturally, I talked to him.”

“Yeah. *Naturally*. Continue.”

“By the time we were done, he realized he didn’t have his wallet, so I paid. He said he owed me, so I guess that’s why he came here to help out.”

“So, you *did* tell him you were moving?”

“No. He said he looked up my employee records and saw I had submitted a change of address, which I had on Wednesday.”

“Sounds a little stalkerish to me. You believe him?”

“Girl, I don’t know what to believe. But...” I sigh again. “Here’s the deal. He said he wants me to help him with his temper.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“No, I’m not. That’s what he said.”

“Quin—do you really think this guy wants you around so you can help him with his temper?”

Still staring up at the ceiling fan, I watch the blades spin around and around, similar to the way Essex has my head spinning. I ask, “What do you think he wants?”

“Isn’t it obvious? He wants you. Duh!”

“He doesn’t *want* me, Ella.”

“O-M-G. He does! I should’ve known that when he came to my apartment looking for you. Like, who does that? Now, it all makes sense. That’s the reason he wanted you to work at his company so badly. I’m amazed he would go to such great lengths.”

“I think you’re looking at it all wrong, Ella. If that was the case, why was he so mean to me during the interview?”

“Just to throw you off concerning his original plans for you, I suppose, and it worked. Look at you two now.”

I stop staring at the fan and sit up with my legs crossed. I say, “I hear what you’re saying. I do, but I’m going to take him at his word. He said he thinks the reason he got a new client is that he was in such a good mood after he had lunch with me. Therefore, he thinks if I help him with his temper, it’ll be good for business.”

“If you believe that, I got a bridge to nowhere I can sell you.”

“Ella...”

“Let’s say he’s legit. What time will you have to be his personal etiquette consultant when you’re working full time in a different position?”

“I mean, my understanding is, it wouldn’t be a full-time thing. I’ll probably just give him some pointers in passing, at lunch or via email...”

“Quintessa Bailey, are you seriously considering this?”

“I don’t think I have much of a choice at this point.”

“You could’ve just told him no.”

“I could have. I just felt like—I don’t know. I felt like I needed to do it—like he honestly needed me to. I don’t know, Ella...there’s something about him and I really can’t explain it. He’s a jerk, but—gosh—there’s something.”

“Something like what?”

“I can’t—I can’t put my finger on it and it’s frustrating because he’s so *not* the kind of person I would normally be around. It’s—”

I sigh and drop my head. “I need some sleep. That’s all. I’m delirious. I’ll wake up in the morning either excited about the future or regretting everything I’ve done in the last week. Are you still coming over tomorrow to help me paint?”

“Yes, but I think it’s a little too early to be painting an accent wall when you don’t have curtains yet.”

“Well, the furniture will just have to match the wall. I’m going to get the paint and brushes early in the morning and probably get started before you get here.”

“Okay, girl. Well, get some sleep.”

“I’ll try. It’s always hard to sleep the first night in a new place.”

“I know, but it’s exciting at the same time, right?”

“It is.”

“You know I’m a miss you over here, too. I won’t have anyone to bug on a regular basis—no one to talk to.”

“You have a boyfriend.”

“Looks like you have one now, too!” she quips, then cackles.

“And on that note, I will see you tomorrow. Bye, El.”

“Bye, girl.”

I peel myself up off the floor because if I fall over right here, I'm going to be asleep. I make sure the deadbolt on the door is activated, then dig out a nightgown from my bag of clothes. I take a shower, realizing how difficult this will be without a shower curtain – yet another thing I need to add to the list for when I return to the store. I manage to take a quick one, then after throwing on my nightgown, I unpack items for the bed – a fitted sheet, pillow and comforter. Then I fall across the bed, let out a deep sigh and rest. Tomorrow is a new day – the last weekend day – before I have to return to work on Monday and deal with *him*.



# Chapter 18

Essex



Sleep didn't come easily last night, and that's *her* fault. As I tossed and turned, all I could think about was how she was alone in that apartment with practically nothing. I know how it is to start from nothing and the joy of being able to afford a place to live and take care of one's self, but I don't like this for her. She deserves more than this.

Sitting in the car at my parent's home on a Sunday, I have this heavily on my mind – how I could make Quintessa's life so much better – but she doesn't know me yet. Doesn't trust me. She knows the old me but doesn't know I'm really that person. She's not particularly fond of the new me. The *baller* me. The man with it all. What's frustrating is, I have no clue at this point how to reintroduce that person to her.

My phone rings. It's my mother calling. I answer, "I'm outside."

"I know you're outside. Are you just going to sit in the car the whole time, or will you be joining us for brunch?"

"I'm getting out now. Bye."

Walking up to the house – the only thing my mother has ever requested I buy for her and dad – I let myself in and head to the deck where I know they are. It's a warm, bright spring morning. Besides the feeling that's pulling me to rescue my princess, I'm feeling good. That'll probably all change once I sit down to eat with my mother. I love her, but she has her

ways. I usually spend most of our time together trying to deal with them.

“Son!” Dad gets up holding his back for support. I’ve been telling him to see a chiropractor, but old people are set in their ways – or maybe it’s just my stubborn parents. Perhaps it’s where I get my attitude.

I lean over to offer him a sideways half-hug and follow up with a pat on the shoulder.

“Hey there, Stewart,” Mom says. She refuses to acknowledge me as *Essex*. Says that’s not what she named me. It used to bother me back in the day, but I’ve accepted it from her – no one else.

I lean down to kiss her on the temple.

She says, “Go on, sit down and get yourself a plate of this food. I don’t care how much money you pay them people around your house—they’ll never make a meal as good as your mother.”

I take a flimsy paper plate and put some eggs, sausage, grits and biscuits on it. My mother is a good cook, but she has the habit of cooking the same things over and over again. With a chef, I get to have a variety of foods and try new things to shake up an otherwise mundane routine. I want to enjoy life and that means adding a little spice to it. It also means trying to please my parents, although I know they don’t approve of my choices.

I take a plastic fork and begin eating. I can feel their eyes on me like they haven’t seen me in ages. It has me thinking back to the last time I was over here. Last November – almost five months ago. Five months. My parents live fifteen minutes away from me and I haven’t visited them in five months. I must say I’m embarrassed by that.

Mom says, “So, what’s been going on? How have you been? I saw you on the news a few weeks ago talking about your charity event. People around here can’t get enough of it.”

“It’s a big deal, Mother.”

“How’s that? Explain it to me.”

“This year, people will come to the charity and bid on artwork from local artists. However much money is raised, I match it and submit it to the charity of my choice. This year, it’s going to Nourishing America.”

“What made you narrow it down to that organization?” Dad inquires.

I shrug. “The statistics. There are about eleven million children in the United States alone who are food insecure.”

“Back in the day, we ain’t hear nothing like that?”

“Nope. Sure didn’t,” Dad cosigns.

“What does that mean, Stewart?” Mother asks.

“When a person is food insecure, it means they don’t have food or don’t have enough food to eat to nourish their bodies.”

Dad says, “When I grew up, we always had *something* to eat. Now, was it always what we wanted? No. Most of the time, it wasn’t. But when you’re hungry, a big pot of beans or rice always did the trick. Why can’t people afford beans and rice these days?”

Who knew my philanthropic efforts would come under scrutiny from my own parents? I respond, “I don’t know, Dad, but I don’t believe in letting kids starve because their parents are irresponsible.”

“Now *that* I agree with wholeheartedly,” Mother says. “So, hooray for you, son, for doing something for these children. Lord knows there ain’t enough people out here trying to help other folks, especially the ones with the most. Don’t make no sense. One man has billions of dollars in the same country where people are out here living in tents or paying by the week at some sleazy rundown motel. It just ain’t right.”

“It surely ain’t,” Dad says.

Mother continues, “And it’s the people with money who won’t spare some loose change for a homeless person. It’s always the folks who have less who give the most.”

Dad says, “That tells you about their heart condition, doesn’t it?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Mom responds. “It sure does.”

I don't even need to be here for this conversation. Looks like they're having a good time all on their own.

To involve myself somehow so I don't feel like a third wheel, I ask, “How have you been feeling lately, Mother?”

“I have my good days and bad days. Today is a...eh...semi-good day, I suppose. I felt good enough to cook and coax you to come over. You're so *busy* these days, I didn't think you'd make it...out here being *Essex DePaul*...whoever *that* is.”

Frustration claws at me. I lean back in my chair because I'm officially done eating. It perplexes me how this remains a topic of conversation whenever I come around. I changed my name, changed my appearance – I became a better person, and you know who they want me to be? They still want the obese kid who had nothing. This is proof you can't please everybody. That's why you have to do what's best for you because people, especially family members, will coach you on and tell you you're the best thing smoking, even when they know you're living far below your potential.

I say, “I won't go there yet again, but—”

“You need to go there,” she asserts. “You know what's going to happen, don't you? You're going to find yourself *by* yourself, wondering where the years have gone while you were out here making all these millions and trying to save the world.”

“I'm not saving anything.”

“There was no fancy philanthropist running to Detroit to save us when your father got laid off from that motor company,” she gripes. “Where were our handouts when we didn't have anything in the cabinet but a bag of long grain rice and corn meal? When your father had to go fishing one day just to bring home dinner for that day?”

Sitting up tall, I ask, “Are you insinuating that just because no one helped us, my organization shouldn't help anyone?”

“That's not what I'm saying at all.”

“It sure sounds like it.”

“All I’m saying is, while you’re out here trying to save the world, your life is passing you right on by.”

“But it’s not.”

“Then where’s your wife? Hunh? I don’t care how much money you got—a man needs a good woman in his corner.”

I glance over at Dad. He ain’t saying nothing, but I know he agrees with her. Mother has always been the extrovert in the relationship. The more vocal one. He’s more on the laid back, quiet side and that’s a good thing, I suppose. I couldn’t imagine if they both were as rambunctious as her. I love my mother, but when she talks, she has no tact in her delivery. That’s probably where I got it from.

I say, “Mother, you have enough on your plate. I do not need you worrying about me and my personal life.”

“Well, *somebody* needs to worry about it.” She coughs. “You ain’t...” Now she’s sipping water.

“Are you okay?” I inquire.

“I’m fine. What I was saying was, you ain’t getting no younger.”

“None of us are,” I respond.

“Exactly. I want to see you get married and have a family, but from the looks of it, I’m not even gon’ see that.”

“Mother—”

“Whatever happened to that girl you used to like in high school?” She looks up at dad and asks. “What was her name, honey? It’s on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t call it.”

“Her name is Quintessa,” I say.

Mother’s eyes brighten. “Yes. You used to call her Tessa or something like that.”

“Tessie.”

“Right. Tessie. I remember she came here looking for you.”

This is news to me. Quintessa came back? But why? Did she want to see me? Did she miss me? I say, “She actually came here?”

“Yeah,” Mother answers.

“She came into *this* house and talked to you and Dad?”

“Yes,” she reiterates. “I thought I told you that. You remember that, Senior?”

She calls my dad Senior, since I’m *supposed* to be ‘junior’.

“Yeah, I remember. It was about six—maybe seven years ago.”

Mother says, “And what a beautiful woman she grew up to be—I tell you that!”

“Did she say what she wanted?”

“She was interested in how you were and *where* you were and we couldn’t tell her anything since you wanted us to keep your lil’ secret about changing your identity and all that. And why does it have to be a secret, anyway? I never understood that.”

“Mother, we’ve been down this road so many times—I don’t care to take another trip. I’ll tell you now like I told you then—I did what I had to do.”

She shakes her head in disappointment.

I continue, “And why are you just now telling me she came back looking for me?”

“I didn’t think you cared to be honest,” she says, rolling her neck.

“Why wouldn’t I? Tessie was my entire world back in high school.”

“That was then. I didn’t think you cared anything about the girl anymore now that you’ve become this whole new man.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I thought your interest in her waned just like everything else.”

I shake my head and stare up into the sky. I say, “I found her, by the way.”

“You found Tessie?” Mother asks.

“Yes. I hired her to work for DePaul & Company.”

“Well, I’ll be...did she recognize you?” Dad asks.

“No, I don’t think so.”

Mother frowns. “Now what kind of twisted stuff is this? Do you hear this, Senior?”

“Darlene, let the boy talk.”

*The boy.* That’s the problem I perceive with most parents. They never acknowledge their children are grown. I’m in my mid-thirties and all they see when they look at me is a boy – a child. The grown man who I am now – a man who’s got it all together – they don’t know what to do with him.

“I guess she wouldn’t recognize you, since you done became somebody else,” Mother says. “But that’s neither here nor there. If you want the girl, what’s taking you so long to sit down and have a conversation with her? She’s all you ever wanted. You were obsessed with her the moment we moved here. Remember when she used to come over and help you with your homework?”

How could I forget? Quintessa wasn’t like other girls. She didn’t care about how I looked. She just liked me as a person. One day soon, hopefully, I’ll find out why. I always wanted to know that about her.

Dad says, “And she has to like you the same way if she’s willing to come over here after all those years to see how you were doing.”

Mother purses her lips and shakes her head again.

“Mother, why are you always giving me a hard time about this? I made myself a better person.”

“In whose eyes, though, son? In the eyes of the world—of people who don’t matter? When it’s all said and done, do you really think these people will have your back? Family is all

there is. Try taking *that* to the bank over them millions of dollars you can't get enough of.

"You mean the same dollars that bought you this waterfront property?"

"Chile, if you—"

"I know you both don't particularly care for what I've done or who I've become, but I am who I am and I like this version of myself."

"You know what I find interesting, though," Dad says. "When Quintessa came looking for you, she was looking for the *real* you—the boy from high school who would've grown up into himself. She was looking for Stewart Dennis, Jr.—not this *Essex DePaul* character you've become."

"Character?"

"Yes. Character—someone you're portraying. Not yourself. I'm your father and I barely recognize you so how on *earth* would she?"

Though I'm fuming inside, I keep my composure when I stand and ask, "So, what would you have me do now? What's done is done."

"You're right," Mother says. "What's done *is* done, and we will live with the consequences of our actions, won't we?"

"Facts," I say. "And on that note, I'll grab some lunch on the way home because I thought I was coming over here to spend time with my folks—not be rebuked about my decisions."

"Son," Dad says, trying to garner my attention while I'm walking away from the table, but it's too late for that. I'm beyond listening to anything they have to say at this point. It shouldn't be this way when I visit. I was reluctant to come here for this very reason.

I say, "I'm good, Dad. I'll see you."

I continue to the car and just sit there for a moment, feeling like I've somehow failed them. At this stage in my life, how is it that I'm feeling good about myself and my accomplishments



but my parents continue to harp on all the changes I made to make myself a better person? How does that work?

# Chapter 19

Quintessa



The first night in my new place was a success. After all the work I did yesterday, I slept like a baby, then woke up refreshed. I went to Bed, Bath & Beyond specifically to purchase a shower curtain. I found a pretty one with big sunflowers on it – something to brighten my day when I drag myself out of bed in the mornings. I bought some plush, yellow bath rugs to match.

I swung by Lowe's to pick up the turquoise paint for my living room and while I'm there, I get some light blue and dark blue samples, just to see how they would look. After a quick lunch, I'm ready to get to work. Ella said she'd be here by three. It's a little after two. I haven't heard from her so far today.

I lay down some plastic to protect the beige carpet and add sample brush strokes of light and dark blue. Then I try my first choice – the turquoise. It's perfect. I'm no interior decorator, but in my head, I can already envision what the room will look like – the curtains, the sofa, couches, area rug...I see it all. It'll be a paradise when I'm done. I need that kind of space to decompress.

My phone rings. It better not be Ella calling me saying she can't make it. I carefully lower my paintbrush and walk over to the kitchen counter where my phone rests. Whoever it was hung up before I could reach it. I pick up the phone and see a missed text message from Ella:

Ella: sorry...have to do something with my sister. I can be there around

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I text her back:

Quintessa: okay, but don't stress. If you can't make it, don't worry about it.

Ella: thanks, Quin

I check other notifications on my phone. I had assumed the caller who was quick to hang up before was Ella but turns out, it wasn't. *The Dictator* shows in my call log. You already know who that is and yes, that is how I saved his number in my phone.

Why did he call me? He didn't leave a message. Should I call him back? No. Maybe he called me by mistake. How would I look calling him back if he called me accidentally? Like I'm just sitting over here waiting for people to talk to and don't have anything else to do with my time?

So, I don't bother. I take a water break and look at the five strokes of turquoise paint I put on the wall. Slow progress is better than no progress. I take pride in doing things on my own, but painting has to be one of the most frustrating activities I've ever done. It's so messy. I already got speckles of paint on my hands – probably got some in my hair, too. Now, I'm rethinking my whole decorating strategy. I should've just left the wall white, but it's too late now.

I go back, dip my brush and give it another go. My arms already hurt. Feels like I'm lifting ten-pound weights. At this rate, it'll take at least two weeks for me to paint *one* wall.

Lazily, I take another break by sitting on the floor, eating Cheetos. It's times like this – times when I'm alone – that I overthink my life choices. What would've happened if I'd gotten married earlier, or taken a different job after college? Where would I be? Would my life be better than it is now? Would I be starting over like this? Would I be staring at a messed-up wall and eating Cheetos I don't even like?

A knock at the door takes me out of my thoughts. I hop up, open it and there's a Hispanic guy there, dressed in navy blue khakis with a matching color shirt.

Opening the door, I say, “Hi. Can I help you?”

“Yes, I have a furniture delivery.”

“Um, no. You must be on the wrong floor. I didn’t order any furniture.”

“This is the address, ma’am,” he says, looking down at a clipboard. “Are you Quintessa Bailey?”

“Yes, but I—”

“Then I have a living room set and a kitchenette to deliver.”

“But I’m trying to tell you I didn’t order this.”

The guy studies the paperwork again and says, “The order was placed by Essex DePaul.”

My stomach bottoms out. Now, I know why he called. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The guy leans close, holds the clipboard out in front of me and says, “Here it is right here.” He points to Essex’s name.

“Hold on for a minute, please.” I motion to close the door.

He says, “Miss, we can’t take this back to the warehouse. If we don’t drop this off today, we’re both getting pink slips. That was the boss’s orders.”

“And Essex is your boss?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

My head splinters. This is maddening. I ask, “And just how many furniture deliveries do you usually make in a day because I didn’t think Essex was in the furniture business?”

“He’s not. We work at his properties – mainly the estate. Listen, ma’am, we’re a small business just out here trying to make it, so please, just let us leave the furniture. I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but I need my job.”

I can sympathize with him on that. I kinda feel sorry for him. He’s practically begging me to let him leave this furniture for fear he’d lose his contract with Essex. I know the struggle, but I don’t like the way Essex wields his power over people like they’re not human. Why take the time to do a good deed

by buying me furniture, but then threaten people to get it delivered? He's so twisted. One minute he's playing nice, the next he's extremely off-putting. I do not want to be tangled in any parts of his confusing webs. But I'm supposed to be helping him...

How do you help someone become a better person when they do not have an empathetic bone in their body?

I say, "Okay, just bring it all in."

"Gracias, gracias," he says, placing his hands together and bows to me.

I call Essex. He picks up on the first ring and says, "If you'd answered your phone earlier, you would've known they were coming with the furniture."

"And what makes you think I need you to buy me furniture?"

"Just a hunch."

"Well, I don't need it, and I'm not keeping it."

"You *are* keeping it," he asserts, but those words didn't come through the receiver. Essex is standing in my doorway, sliding his cell phone into his pocket. "Hi."

A frown instinctively comes to my face like it always does when I see him because I never know what to expect. Still, I can't help but notice how handsome he is. He really is the kind of man who can take a woman's breath away with his mere presence. And why does he have to dress so good? Dang! I can't help but look at him from head to toe. The black jeans he's wearing are everything. His whole outfit is a vibe – the kind of swagger he doesn't exude at work. Like maybe on the weekends, he can be *normal*, but when he's at work, he's the boss bully. Always on his Ps and Qs. Everything has to be orderly and flawless – like he is – in the looks department, that is...

He has on a white T-shirt with some kind of weird logo on it, so I know it's probably designer. On his feet are some black shoes that look like boots with studs poking out of them. And did he get his beard lined up again?

Mercy...

I ask, "What are you doing here?"

"I figured I'd stop by to make sure everything I ordered was delivered."

"Well, since you're here, you can tell them to take that stuff back to the warehouse or wherever it came from. How are you just gon' buy me furniture like I'm your lil' charity case? I can buy my own furniture. I just need to save some money first."

"Well, now you don't have to worry about it. And I've never considered you a charity case, so you can get that idea out of your head."

"Whatever the *case*, you don't know what kind of furniture I like. You don't even know my color scheme."

He glances around the room, his eyes landing on the wall where I'd started painting and says, "From the looks of it, *you* don't know your color scheme." He points to the wall and says, "Who did that?"

"I did," I reply, amused. "And?"

"It looks like a two-year-old ran up in here with a box of markers and went nuts." He grins.

"You just crack yourself up, hunh? I was trying out different colors."

"Oh, *that's* what you call it."

"Okay, that's it. Leave."

"No. I don't think so."

"I'm not kidding, Essex. Leave."

"Who's going to make me leave?" he asks, stepping up to me with a gleam in his eyes. "You?"

"No. The cops."

"You're going to call the cops on your boss?" he asks. He's so close to me, I can smell his fruity breath. Was he eating candy? He doesn't strike me as the type of man who indulges in sweets.

The men move a couch inside. It's a gray sofa, still wrapped in plastic. Essex tells them, "Keep the sofas away from this wall. We still have to finish painting over here."

"*We?*" I ask. "We, who?"

Essex turns to me and smiles again. My heart flutters.

Oh, my silly, inexperienced heart...making me believe I'm attracted to this terrible man.

"*We* are not painting anything," I inform him. "*You* are going home."

"Oh, come on. Clearly, you need the help."

"I don't need anything, Essex, now go on home."

"No." He flashes an arrogant smile. "I won't."

His smile drops as our eyes stay connected for longer than I expected they would. We stay this way – staring at each other like we can't look away. It's not until the movers are back, hauling something else inside that I blink away from him. I'm thoroughly overwhelmed – so much so that I feel like my head is about to explode. I say, "Okay, what's going on here?"

"What do you mean?" he asks, folding his arms across his chest, standing wide-legged like this is his domain.

"I mean, why are you doing this? *All* of this?"

"I told you why, Quintessa."

"No, you didn't—"

"I did. You just refuse to acknowledge it. So, I figured I'd *show* you that I like you instead of telling you because you don't listen too well."

"Why does that sound like an insult?"

"It's not," he says. "Okay, let me reset for a minute so I can convey to you exactly what I want to say." He inhales deeply, then after releasing it, his chest moving inward, he says, "I like you, Quintessa."

"No, you don't."

"I do. A lot."

So, Ella was right. He *does* like me! But why? I've done nothing extraordinary to capture this man's unwavering attention. All of this is over my head. I've never had a man come into my life so quickly and help me do anything. The last man I was involved with was the one who needed all the help. What am I supposed to do with this kind of attention?

When I stop my head from spinning, I look at Essex, surprised to see he's already staring at me with anticipation glowing in his eyes, as if waiting for me to respond to his confession.

"That's it, boss," one of the delivery drivers says.

"Thank you, Mauricio," Essex says, patting him on the shoulder.

He takes out his wallet and hands them both one-hundred-dollar tips.

"Gracias, Señor," Mauricio says along with his workmate.

"Yep," Essex replies casually.

He doesn't say, 'you're welcome'. He just offers up a dry 'yep'. His nonchalance is appalling.

The workers leave. Now, I'm alone with this powerful man who smells so doggone good. Who looks good. He's giving good energy right now. It's baffling to me how he's bulldozed his way into my life in such a short period of time.

He rubs his hands together saying, "Snap out of it, girl. Let's get to work."

Still frozen in place, I look at him as he walks over to the paint bucket. He picks up the brush I had and asks, "Why were you using *this*?"

"Because it's a brush."

"You don't have one of those roller brushes?"

"Yeah. I was saving that one for Ella. She was supposed to come over here and help me."

"She no-showed on you?"



“She had something come up. She said she’d be over here later.”

*Why am I explaining anything to you?*

“You might want to call her and let her know you got some help now. Where’s the roller brush?”

“Essex, I really don’t—”

“Where is it?” he asks, looking at boxes and bags on the floor.

I say, “It’s in the kitchen in a Lowe’s bag.”

He walks over there. “Ah...found it.” He heads back over to where I am – by the wall, nervously trying to paint without messing up the trim.

I tell him, “Since you insist on doing this, I can try to find something to protect your clothes. I got an apron around here somewhere—”

“I’m good.” He pours some paint into the tray and rolls the brush in it.

“Are you sure? I know your clothes must cost a fortune and that brush is going to have paint flying everywhere.”

“I said I’m good, so stop asking me.” He rolls a few strokes on the wall.

“See, this is why I don’t like you.”

He stops and looks at me. I swear I see a twinkle in his eyes before he smiles and says, “You don’t like me because I’m trying to help you?”

“No. I don’t like you because of your mouth. You spew out insults so easily, you don’t realize when you say them.”

“How? Give me an example.”

“You just did it. You told me to *stop asking* you if you were sure about not protecting your clothes from the paint. That’s a prime example of you being rude.”

“You’re right. I am good at it, aren’t I?”

I roll my eyes and pick up my paintbrush. Trying to get through to him is pointless.

He says, “That’s why you’re going to be helping me with that, right? When you perceive I’m out of line at work, or with you, it’s your job to correct me.”

“Yeah, sure...” I dip my brush in the paint.

He says, “With that brush, you’d be better served just doing the edges, especially since you didn’t put down any tape to protect the molding. I’ll handle everything in between.”

And now he’s taking over...

He’s really getting into it, rolling the brush up and down the wall. He takes off his shirt and now he’s just wearing the white tank and jeans.

Jeez!

The man has arm muscles for days and a palisade of muscles peering through his tank. I try to pretend I’m not watching him, but I can’t help but watch the way his muscles bulge as he goes up and down with the roller brush.

Up and down.

Up and down.

He’s taken on this task like it’s one of his work deals. He’s very serious about it – giving it his all.

I take a sip of water just to keep my eyes off him. A nagging sensation to strike up a conversation comes over me. That’s so not like me, but it’s quiet in here and I need a distraction. “So, I take it you don’t work on weekends?”

“I’m working now, aren’t I?”

“I wasn’t talking about this. I mean actual work—DePaul & Company *work*.”

“No. I don’t work on weekends or discuss work.”

“Okay, then what do you do on the weekends when you’re not rolling around the city looking for single women who need help painting?”

He grins. “You’re funny. You know that?”

“And you’re good at dodging questions. Now, let’s hear it.”

“Yesterday, when we were out to lunch, I answered this question, but since you weren’t listening, I’ll answer it again. I don’t do much of anything on the weekends. Today, I went to visit my parents and that didn’t go over too well. Yesterday, after we parted ways, I stayed home for the rest of the day.”

“You will never make me believe you stay home on a Saturday night.”

“It’s true. I’m a homebody.”

“You’re a liar. That’s what you are.”

He laughs. “Why do I have to be a liar?” he asks and bites his bottom lip.

And now I’m looking at them. My eyes are being sucked in like he’s put a spell on me.

“Uh...you just are. There’s no way you spend your weekends at home. You have all the money in the world.”

“Your point?”

“You should be doing stuff that broke people like myself always say they’re going to do if they ever come across a lil’ bit of money.”

“Like what?” He rolls the brush into the pan again to soak it with just the right amount of paint.

“To go somewhere exotic. Travel the world. Go to these places that I see on my Facebook feed where the waters are so clear, you can see the fish swimming while standing on the pier. That’s what your life should be.”

“I travel, but I usually do it alone, so it’s not as fulfilling as you’d think it would be.”

That’s odd. Why would a man of his caliber need to travel alone anywhere? I’m sure there’s always some gold digger looking for a temporary good time. And he traveled alone? Very odd.

He asks, “What else would you do if you were rich?”

“For starters, I’d buy myself some furniture so my boss doesn’t have to do it.”

He grins and says, “I didn’t *have* to do it. I wanted to.”

“To make up for how mean you were to me on the day of my interview? If that’s the case, I’m going to need a whole lot more than furniture.”

“Ouch.”

He dips the brush again.

I grin and then say, “At this rate, you’ll be finished within the next hour.”

“That’s the plan. I’m not going to have you up in here painting by yourself. As a matter of fact, if you’re planning on painting anything else, let me know and I’ll send someone over to handle it for you.”

“I’m not painting anything else. I only wanted this accent wall, so I’m good.”

I quietly observe him work a moment more. His biceps are pulling double duty with hardly any effort. He’s so tall, he doesn’t need a ladder to reach up high, close to the ceiling. His lengthy body and long legs are enough all on their own.

I tear my gaze away from him, lower to my knees and dip the brush again to focus on the area near the trim. I ask, “So, do you visit your parents every Sunday?”

“No, although I do try to get over there as much as my temper would allow.”

“Oh. I take it you don’t get along with your parents.”

“Did I say that?”

“No, but I’m trying to read between the lines here.”

“Don’t do that. It’s easy for things to get misconstrued when you do that. Just listen to what I’m telling you and take it for what it is.”

“Okay. My bad. Jeez! I was only trying to have a conversation.”

He lowers the brush into the pan and says, “My mother is sick, so she’s been on a mission to see me married with a kid.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Which part? That she’s sick, or the constant pestering to marry me off?”

“That she’s sick. And I don’t think she’s intentionally trying to annoy you. My mother wants the same for me.”

“Then why haven’t you given her what she wants?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” I toss back.

“But I asked you first, so answer me.”

I say, “I haven’t met anyone so I can’t give her what she wants. What am I to do? Pick up some random guy like I’m at a drive-thru and ask him if he wants to go half on a baby?”

He laughs. “Yeah, I wouldn’t advise that, but if you don’t have any options, I’ll split one with you.”

“Shut up, Essex.”

He smirks. “Seriously. I think we’d have pretty children, especially because of you.”

He says it like he’s been imagining it, and now he has me thinking about some mean lil’ babies running around – a little boy who looks like him and a girl who looks like me.

*Quintessa, what are you thinking, girl?*

“Ay...you got some bottled water around here?”

“I do. Let me grab one for you.”

While I go to the kitchen to get water, he opens two windows in the living room.

“Here you go,” I say, getting his attention and handing him the bottle.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He chugs water and when he's drunk half the bottle, he walks over to the kitchen and places it on the counter.

I ask, "Why haven't you given your mother what she wants?"

"For the same reason you haven't. I won't be with a woman to fulfill anyone else's hopes and dreams for me. If I'm with a woman, it'll be because I love her and she's someone I want to spend my life with. Call me old-fashioned, but I've never desired to have a child out of wedlock."

"Wow. Something we agree on," I say. "I didn't think that was possible."

"Me either."

"Don't say that like *I'm* the difficult one," I tell him.

"You are. You're just as difficult as I am, Tessie."

I cackle. "You knew that was a lie before it left your mouth."

He finishes the water, and then he's right back to painting.

I say, "I'm surprised you don't already have an army of mean lil' boss babies running around here, tearing Florida all to pieces."

"No, I don't, but one day, I will. My mother will just have to wait."

"Mine, too."

I stand back to look at the edges to see if any spots on the wall near it need more paint. I glance at Essex again and get an eyeful of muscles. I'm so enraptured, my grip is weak. I nearly drop my brush.

*Girl, stop staring. Get a grip and not of him.*

*I need another distraction...*

*Um...*

*Got it!*

"Hey, what were you eating before you came here?"

“I wasn’t eating anything. I was supposed to have brunch with my parents, but I ended up leaving earlier than expected.”

“No, I mean immediately before you walked in. Your breath smelled like fruit.”

“Why were you all up into my mouth like that?”

“Because you were all in my face...*like that.*”

The corner of his mouth quirks up. Nearing the end of the wall, he says, “If you must know, I was eating some candy.”

“What kind?”

“Circus Peanuts.”

“I thought that smell was familiar! I used to eat those all the time in high school. I wouldn’t dare now.”

“Why not?”

“They’re nothing but sugar. I may as well open a bag of sugar and pour it into my mouth. It’s the same thing.”

“I didn’t eat the entire bag, woman.”

“I’m surprised you eat them at all. That’s crazy. What are the odds we’d like the same candy?”

“We don’t anymore since you’re so worried about sugar.”

“Aren’t you with all those muscles and all? The CEO has to keep it tight, right?”

“I have a home gym. I work out daily.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

He looks at me.

“What?” I ask.

“You say that like exercise is a bad thing.”

“It’s not. It does give me a better understanding of why you never leave the house. You got a gym. You probably have a theater, basketball court, pool—the whole shebang.”

“I do, and I have a personal chef and a housekeeper.”

“Aren’t we just boujee?” I mumble.

He lowers the brush. “Excuse me?”

*Oh, shoot. He heard me.*

Hiding behind a smirk, I say, “What? I didn’t say anything.”

He says, “I don’t have the time to think about meals, house cleaning, landscaping—any of that. It only makes sense that I hire someone to do those things for me. It doesn’t make me stuck-up, or whatever it was that you said. It makes me smart.”

*Note to self: don’t mumble around this guy. He hears everything.*

“Yeah. You’re right.”

“You don’t have to agree with me, Tessie. I don’t care if you do or don’t.”

I don’t respond. There’s only so much I can say to his ‘smart remarks’ without getting tired, so I let this one go. I don’t know how much help I’ll be with his temper at the office if I can’t handle him one-on-one outside of the office.

After a few more rolls of the brush, he says, “Ah, there. All done.”

I take a step back to look at it. It’s perfect. I say, “It looks nice.”

“Yeah, it does.”

“Do I need to go over it with a second coat?”

“No. Didn’t you read the can? It says one coat and you’re good.”

“Oh. Right.”

*Now you can go home so my breathing can return to normal.*

He says, “I suppose I should get going. I have a long day tomorrow.”

*Yes! Go...*

“Since you chewed Greta out at the meeting, she’s giving me client files now, so it’s going to be a busy day for me as well.”



“As it should be.” He walks to the kitchen, turns on the faucet and asks, “Where’s your hand soap?”

“I was at the store today and completely forgot to buy some. There’s a never-ending list of things I need to buy for a new place.”

Essex does the best he can, trying to scrub the little bit of paint off his hands with hot water. He grabs a dish towel from an open box I have yet to unpack and dries his hands. Afterward, he pulls out his wallet, slides out a hundred-dollar bill and places it on the counter. He says, “The next time I’m over here, I want you to have some soap.”

*Next time?*

“I don’t need any money, Essex and what do you mean next time? You have no other reason to come over here now.”

Taking his shirt from the sofa, he says, “I do. You’re here, aren’t you? Oh, and by the way, I don’t want you moving these sofas by yourself. I can help you arrange the furniture after the paint dries.”

“I think I can manage. I’m not a weakling.”

*But in his eyes, he must view women as such...*

“I didn’t say you were. Just call me if you need to. How about that? Is that better?”

“I will. Thanks for your help, *and* for buying all this furniture for me. You really didn’t have to.”

“You’re welcome. Can I get a handshake or something before I leave?”

Smiling, I extend my hand to his.

“I change my mind. I don’t want a handshake.”

“No?”

“No.”

*This guy...*

“Then what do you want?” I question.

“Anything other than a handshake. You choose.”

I take a step closer to him, hesitating to do what I think he's asking. I release a breath, then close my arms around him, squeezing his torso until our bodies are pressed together tightly. I nearly lose consciousness at the feel of those thick, sinewy arms encased around me.

I could faint.

Seriously.

I could just drop right now.

This feels good.

Too good.

Spine-tingling good.

Make-a-girl-lose-her-balance good.

I close my eyes and it's like I've drifted off to sleep, but I'm wide awake. At one point, I hear myself moan, but I'm powerless to stop it.

"Are you okay?"

I heard his question, but I don't want to let go just yet.

"Tessie," he says softly, releasing me.

I open my eyes to look at him. "Yes?"

"You good?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Get some rest. Don't be late for work tomorrow."

"Am I ever?"

"I'm just warning you."

As he walks toward the door, he pauses and pulls a small bag of Circus Peanuts from the front left pocket of his jeans.

"You can have the rest of these."

I glance at the bag and say, "I don't want to take your candy."

He reaches for my hand, places the bag there and closes my fingers around it.

“Bye, Tessie.”

“Bye.”

“Oh, and you have some paint on your nose.”

“No, I don’t.”

He smirks as he opens the door. Standing in the doorway, I watch as he jogs down the stairs.

I go back inside, walk quickly to the bathroom to see if I have paint on my nose and I do. *Ugh...so embarrassing.*

I turn on the shower because I am exhausted, and I need to wind down. It’s going to be an early night for me, especially since I have to be at work *on time* tomorrow. And I can’t help but wonder how the dynamic will be between me and my boss now that we’ve gotten a bit more *acquainted*.

# Chapter 20

Essex



When I step into the lobby of my building, I see a yellow ‘caution-wet floor’ sign next to a puddle of brown liquid that I’m assuming is coffee. I mentally order myself to calm down. It’s just an accident, but the longer I see it, the stronger my agitation grows. *My floor.* This is what visitors will see when they step into my place of business. My business represents me. Accidents like this can’t happen here.

I was going to walk past it and keep it moving straight to the elevator, but I’m already in a crappy mood today due to a lack of sleep last night. That’s Quintessa’s fault. After being with her for the better part of yesterday, feeling her in my arms, she’s all I could think about when I closed my eyes. Instead of sleeping, I dreamed about her being next to me where she belongs. Whenever I tried to will myself to sleep, my brain kept me awake to relive every moment we spent together. The shape of her face is embedded in my memory. And her lips – I remember my mouth watering for the taste of them years ago and that longing continuously resides within me to this day. I love everything about Quintessa – from the way she laughs, how she challenges me and the frown she makes when I say something she doesn’t agree with.

Even on the drive over, I kept replaying the way her warm body felt between my arms. And to think I was going to settle for a handshake. I’m glad I didn’t. A mere handshake ain’t going to do nothing for me anymore.

I want Quintessa – need her so badly, my nerve endings ache. Anger settles in me at the thought I’ll never have her, or I’ll still be the guy who’s not good enough. Those distressing thoughts are why I suffer. And when I suffer, people who get in my way suffer – like the person who spilled this coffee and the janitor who has yet to clean it up. This is not what I want to see when I step into my place of business.

“Why is this coffee on my floor?” I yell right here in the lobby. My voice is so loud it ricochets off the walls. People stop what they’re doing when they hear the questioning, but no one says a word. I’m not talking to anyone in particular. I’m just waiting for someone to answer me.

The receptionist scampers over and says, “The janitor is coming to clean it up right now, Mr. DePaul.”

“Why isn’t it cleaned up already? If he can put a caution sign here, he can bring a mop and bucket. I don’t understand this.”

“I put the caution sign there, sir.”

“Then maybe *you* need a mop! Did you spill this?”

“No, sir. I—”

“Do I need to ban coffee in my building?”

“No, Mr. DePaul. It’ll get cleaned up, sir.”

“See that it does, or you can see your way out.”

“I’ll take care of it, sir.”

I continue to the elevator and catch Quintessa’s gaze from across the lobby. She looks shocked. Disgusted, maybe. She shakes her head and goes into the break room.

On the way up to my office, I try to massage frustration out of my neck. It doesn’t work. I’m tense and irritable. I probably should’ve stayed home.

As soon as I step off the elevators, Ms. Davison greets me with a smile.

“Good morning, Mr. DePaul. Your coffee is on your desk and your first meeting of the day is at nine.”

I keep on walking like I don't hear her. I never told her to greet me in the mornings, give me any updates, or have coffee on my desk in the mornings. I'll ask for coffee when I want it, but I guess she calls herself being proactive. The problem with that is, if I didn't ask you to do something, why waste time doing it? I don't want coffee sitting on the desk getting cold, waiting for my arrival.

Finally entering my office, I shut the door, let down the shades, and sit at my desk. I thread my hands behind my head and lean back. Just knowing Quintessa's downstairs has me wanting to go see her. But I can't do that. I won't do that. She shouldn't possess this much power over me.

What do I do now?

Deciding to dive into work, I key the password to unlock my computer and see a message waiting for me on our interoffice messaging system. I click on it. There's a message from Quintessa.

**Quintessa to Essex:** what the heck was that?

The message came through five minutes ago. I already know what she's referring to and though I told her to help me keep my attitude in check, I didn't think she'd make an effort to do it. Pretending I have no idea what she's talking about, I respond:

**Essex to Quintessa:** What was what? Why are you bothering me?

**Quintessa to Essex:** Bothering you?

**Essex to Quintessa:** yes. Bothering me

**Quintessa to Essex:** Because you told me to BOTHER you. No, you BEGGED me to, so that's what I'm doing. Why were you in the building yelling first thing this morning? People haven't even had time to wake up yet and you're already yelling and barking orders.

**Essex to Quintessa:** there was coffee on the floor.

**Quintessa to Essex:** and? Does the world end after coffee is spilled?

**Essex to Quintessa:** more like the end of somebody's job.

**Quintessa to Essex:** unbelievable...

**Essex to Quintessa:** what don't you believe? I don't pay people to smell roses all day.

**Quintessa to Essex:** did it cross your mind for one second that maybe the janitor was on the way to get a mop?

**Essex to Quintessa:** then he wasn't moving fast enough.

**Quintessa to Essex:** okay, so you should've cleaned it up.

**Essex to Quintessa:** you're a funny girl. I don't clean my own house and you think it's my responsibility to clean the office building?

**Quintessa to Essex:** I'm not talking about the whole building. I was referring to that one spot on the floor. What harm would it have done for you to go to the bathroom, grab some paper towels and wipe it up?

She doesn't know me at all if she thinks I would do something so beneath me. When you reach a certain status in life, there are things you just don't do anymore. Millionaires don't do minimum wage work, and they certainly don't mop up spills.

**Essex to Quintessa:** the only thing I clean is my body. Everything else is delegated.

**Quintessa to Essex:** All I'm saying is, you could've handled it more appropriately than that. Instead, you had to wield your big stick and show everybody who's boss like they don't already know.

**Essex to Quintessa:** you ain't seen a big stick yet

**Quintessa to Essex:** and this is why nobody likes you...

A smile comes to my face. Somehow, she thinks it's a bad thing not to be liked. Social media has these people trippin' with this 'like' nonsense. People haven't liked me for years. The first time I was teased – that I can remember – I was in the third grade and each year got progressively worse. It's proof that people will hate you at all stages of your life. It doesn't matter if you're poor or prospering. Good or bad. Somebody, somewhere, won't like you. I respond:

**Essex to Quintessa:** do you really think I care if people like me or not?

**Quintessa to Essex:** what happened to the guy who asked me to help him be more 'likable' and 'courteous'??? Or have you forgotten about that?

**Essex to Quintessa:** I haven't forgotten a thing, but in this instance, I'm right. Now, stop messaging me. I have work to do.

**Quintessa to Essex:** I don't know why I thought you were serious about this whole etiquette thing, but now that I know you're not, you won't have to worry about me saying anything else about it, sir.

I don't say anything more. I go about my morning. The meeting at nine goes off without a hitch. The meeting at ten was the preliminary meeting with Mr. Cruz to discuss the game plan for the merger with South Florida Financial – a small tax firm we acquired in the fourth quarter of 2021. At

noon, I check messenger to see if I've received any further communication from Quintessa.

There's nothing.

I imagine she's on lunch right now with her work buddy, so I head down to the first floor specifically just to see if she's down there.

Jackpot.

As soon as I step off the elevator, I see her. She's with Ms. Valentine heading in my direction. I haven't thought this all the way through so I don't know if I should talk normally to her or maintain our *business relationship* while we're here in the presence of others. Whatever I was going to do, it was interrupted by Susan Musk as she walks up to me with her food in a takeout container heading back up to her office. She says, "Well, hello there."

"Hi," I say, but my eyes are on Quintessa. I know she sees me, but she purposely doesn't make eye contact with me.

Mrs. Musk says, "I saw your calendar was clear this afternoon—I was hoping I could squeeze in some one-on-one time with you to discuss a few things."

Quintessa walks on by – doesn't so much as glance my way. I may as well be invisible – as invisible as Mrs. Musk is to me right now.

"Sir?"

I tear my eyes from the back of Quintessa's head and look at Mrs. Musk. The lady is getting on my nerves even more so than the time she told me she was related to Elon. Driving a Tesla and sharing a surname doesn't give one automatic kinship to the guy, but you can't tell her that. Right now, she's in my way so I say, "Sure, Mrs. Musk. Have Ms. Davison set up a meeting for us this afternoon," just to stop her from all the nagging.

"Perfect. Thank you."

The elevator doors open. Mrs. Musk gets on. I should've gotten on with her and gone back to my office, but Quintessa



has once again gotten under my skin. I hate that she has this kind of power over me.

I walk to catch up to her and Ms. Valentine and say, “Ms. Bailey, I need to speak with you.”

She stops in her tracks, turns around, and looks at me in utter disbelief. Ms. Valentine whispers something in her ear and Quintessa whispers something back. She must’ve told her to go on to the cafeteria because Ms. Valentine hightails it inside like she’s running for her life. And Quintessa is left staring at me like we’re in a contest to see who blinks first.

I take a few steps closer to her and say, “Come with me.”

“Come with you where?”

“Shh. Come.”

There’s a conference room near the bathrooms in the lobby – a small one that’s usually never in use. I lead her there and pull the door open to find two guys sitting with laptops, looking like they’re knee-deep into an assignment. I say, “Did you reserve this conference room?”

“Uh, no, Mr. DePaul,” one of them says.

“Then, leave. I need this room.”

“Sorry, sir,” the other one says as they scramble to get their belongings. When they finally exit, I motion for Quintessa to enter ahead of me and close the door behind us.

Quintessa walks to the opposite side of the table, crosses her arms and says, “The nerve of you. What do you think you’re doing exactly?”

Brows raised, I ask, “What am *I* doing? Me? You walked right by me like you didn’t see me, and you’re asking me what *I’m* doing?”

“You act like I did it intentionally, which I did not. You’re the CEO of the company, and I just got hired. I can’t be seen talking to you at work like we’re besties. That’s why I walked by. You should know that. I thought that was a given. I’m sure I’ll have to explain to Zahara why you wanted to talk to me in private.” She grunts. “This is insane.”

“You’re telling me you walked past me because you didn’t want to be seen talking to me *here*.”

“Yes. Is that a difficult concept for you?”

“It is because I think your cold shoulder has more to do with our exchange this morning—not what you’re saying now.”

“What exchange! On messenger?”

“Yes, Quintessa. On messenger. Did we communicate any other way this morning besides the ice-cold glare you shot my way from across the lobby?”

“First of all, I don’t consider our messenger chat an *exchange*. You were rude to me, as usual, but me walking by you has nothing to do with that. It has *everything* to do with who you are. You have a reputation to uphold. You don’t talk to the *little* people unless you’re tearing into us about something we did wrong. That’s the culture of this work environment. – scold people for what they didn’t do right, but say nothing when they accomplish something.”

She sighs and massages her temples.

“Listen, Essex. You can’t walk around with your chest poked out and convince yourself that ordering people around is an *exchange*. And, how can you have a legitimate exchange with anyone when you think you’re right about e-ve-ry-thing?”

“Because I usually am.”

She throws up her hands. “You’re beyond fixing. You’re *way* beyond anything I can do for you. You’re not the same man who was at my apartment this weekend. You’re just not. I would suggest you seek some professional help for your anger or *etiquette* issues. There’s no way a grown, intelligent man should have a level-six nuclear meltdown over some spilled coffee. Now, if you would excuse me, I’m on my lunch break,” she says, trying to step around me, but I step in front of her blocking her path instead.

“So this *is* about this morning. Tell the truth.”

“No, it’s not!” She steps around me again and succeeds this time only because I let her, then exits.

After taking into consideration all she’s said and realizing she’s right, I’m still irritated. Did I overreact this morning? Probably. I’m accustomed to having things the way I want them. And since *I* didn’t end this conversation, it didn’t end. I leave the conference room and head straight to the café to finish it. Talking to her in private was the plan, but her actions have made it public. She’ll have to live with that.

# Chapter 21

Quintessa



“Girl, what was that?” Zahara asks as I set my food tray on the table. I sit down, looking around, feeling like I got a target on my back.

“It’s nothing, Zee.” I plaster a smile on my face to disguise my frustration, but I’m not sure if it’s working.

“Well, it didn’t look like nothing. This is like the second time he’s pulled you aside to talk in private. What’s going on? Are you like *working* for him or something?”

I laugh it off and say, “We’re all working for him, Zahara.”

“I don’t mean like that. I mean, like spying on everybody?”

I grin. “No, I’m not a spy. Mr. DePaul wants to know why Greta is not giving me more work,” I say. It’s partially true, just not the whole truth. “I’ll probably get fired soon, anyway, which would be a good thing. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about hearing his big mouth all the time.”

“No! Don’t say that,” Zahara says. “I want you to stay. You’re like the same age as me. I can’t kick it with Greta. She’s too old, and she’s the boss. That would be awkward. Who wants to hang out with their boss?”

“Well, you have Mauve.”

“Girl, please. If you haven’t noticed, Mauve is in her own world.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t be able to stop Mr. DePaul from firing me if that’s what he wanted to do. You know how he is. In the short time I’ve been here, *I* know how he is. You were right about him. About everything. I just...ugh—”

“Oh, shoot,” Zahara says. “He’s back.”

My stomach instantly gets tight and crampy. “Please tell me he’s not coming over here.”

“Crap! Looks like he is.”

And now I’m a sitting duck, forcing myself to eat this chicken sandwich that was so good the other day, I had to get it again today. Now that I’m the object of Essex’s wrath, the sandwich just doesn’t taste as palatable. I may as well be chewing plastic.

Essex pulls out a chair and invites himself to our table. I do not believe this is happening. The discomfort I feel is immeasurable. My belly aches. I don’t know what to say or what to do. What is he doing? This is crazy. Has he lost his mind?

He says, “Ms. Valentine, I need to talk to Ms. Bailey alone.”

“Yes, sir,” Zahara says quickly, standing and leaving with her tray. She was almost done eating anyway, but I still hate that he’s jacked our lunch time together. That he’s making her leave.

As she walks away, he sets his eyes on me and says, “I wasn’t done talking to you earlier.”

“What are you doing?” I ask behind semi-clenched teeth, glancing around at everyone who’s looking over here at us. I’ll never live this down. Never!

“I wasn’t done talking to you before you left the conference room, so I figured I’d finish saying what I had to say.” He places his hands on the table, locking his fingers together like this is a casual meeting between us. He continues, “I’m not as difficult as you make me out to be. And I’m not beyond repair. I know I’m a little much for you, but I thought you were up for the task.”

I'm still nerve-struck. I might as well be on stage right now by the way everyone is looking at me. At us. I can't believe this is happening.

I ask discreetly, "Do you see this?"

He frowns. "What?"

"We have an audience, thanks to you. That's what I was trying to avoid."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have left the conference room. And why are you so pressed about them? Don't pay them any attention. *I want your attention,*" he says and when I don't look at him, he adds, "All of it."

Dominance hangs in his espresso gaze, but something softer is there – something in their deep, dilated depths of darkness. He looks like he wants more from me than what he's asking for, even though what he's asking for is a lot. But what more can I give?

Being that I cannot control the actions of another person, I control what I can control, and that's myself. So, I soften my gaze and focus on deescalating the situation. "What exactly did I do wrong that's got you doing this right now?"

"I don't like how you stroll by me like you don't know me when I was at your place last night, helping you paint and all that."

"Shh, keep your voice down."

He grins. "You're that afraid of what people are going to think?" he asks, glancing around the café like he doesn't have a care in the world.

"I am. You helped me, yes, but that was outside of work. We have to maintain a level of professionalism here, and this—this ain't."

He stews. He knows I'm right whether he wants to admit it or not. He says, "Tell me how you think I could've handled the situation better this morning."

"The coffee incident?"

“Yes.”

“I told you already, Ess—I mean, Mr. DePaul—you just didn’t want to take my advice.”

“You told me to get some paper towels and clean it up myself, and that’s just not going to work for me. Try again.”

And now we’re in a staring match. Again...

Tingles frolic along my forearms. I find myself sinking and dissolving into his eyes again, asking myself for the umpteenth time why they feel so familiar to me. It’s like one of those freaky feelings. Did I meet this guy in a past life or something? The first time it happened, I thought it was a fluke, but now I know it’s not. It’s real – as real as my hammering heartbeat right now as his eyes trace and outline every part of my face – my nose, my eyes, my lips – especially my lips.

I clear my throat and say, “You could have been a little more polite to the receptionist. She’s a nice woman. She’s cordial to everyone who comes in and treats people with respect. Those high-powered executives who are in and out of here every day – she’s the one who greets them before they reach you. I think you need to look at DePaul & Company like a team sport and you’re the captain. You’re great—everyone here knows that—but this is *your* company and you are no better than your weakest employee. It’s *you* who needs to encourage people and make them feel like they are valued and wanted no matter what position they hold. Yelling at someone over a spill is unacceptable.”

“Understood,” he says with a faux smile on his face and an unmistakable twinkle in his eye. “But let me ask you, Ms. Bailey, when was the last time you made someone feel *wanted* and *valued*?”

He sounds bitter when he asks me the question, like I’m supposed to read between the lines somehow. I say, “This isn’t about me.”

“So you think,” he deadpans. “I’ll let you get back to your food. Oh, and just to preserve your *street cred* since you’re so

worried about what your coworkers will think about this interaction between us, I'll yell at you when I get up."

"No, don't—"

Before I can tell him not to do it, he's already on his feet, snapping at me, saying, "And it better be done right the next time or you're out of here! Got it!" and then he walks away.

I'm mortified. I can't move a muscle, though I need to escape. I can't believe he did this to me. I suppose he had to for the reasons he specified. At least this way, it'll take the suspicion off me – of people wanting to know why I was sitting with the CEO in the café – but it's utterly embarrassing at the same time. I could crawl into a hole right now and stay there forever. When I see him outside of this building, I will definitely tell him about his self.



I return to my desk after lunch. It's two hours later and I'm still fully rattled by Essex's actions. Zahara asked me if I was okay and I assured her I was fine. The girl is scared for me. She thinks I'm on the brink of losing my job.

I get a fresh cup of coffee and reset so I can focus without screwing up somebody's taxes. I'm closer to the screen than Ian's glasses, making sure I'm doing everything right when an email comes through from Shanice.

Another one.

She's been sending emails all afternoon. The first one was a reminder that this Friday, the refrigerators are going to be cleaned out and if you left food inside, it would be thrown away. The second email was about upcoming company events, including a 5K for charity in the summer and an employee appreciation function at the DePaul Estate. Now, what is this email about? The words, 'Sad News' are in the subject line. I take a break from the tax screen to swivel over to my email inbox:

**To: DePaul & Company ALL**



**From: Shanice Davison**

**Date: Monday, April 4, 2022 03:13:25 EST**

**Subject: Sad News**

**Mr. DePaul's mother has passed away. He will be out of the office for the rest of the day, and I'm not sure at this point when he will be returning. Please keep him and his family in your thoughts and prayers during this difficult time.**

**Thanks,**

**Shanice Davison**

**Executive Assistant to Essex DePaul**

**Mailroom: 12FL-A8**

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My jaw drops. I hear Greta say, "Oh my goodness. That's terrible." She must've just read the email, too.

My head is spinning. Is this real? Essex was just telling me how he was at his parent's house this past weekend and now his mother is gone? Is this why he was so confrontational with me? Why he was bitter?

Jake says, "Ay, y'all see that email Shanice just sent? The dictator's mom passed. I'm sure he won't shed a tear."

"Jake, that's not cool. Chill," I say. I'm not defending Essex – it's just the situation. His mother died. He mentioned she was sick, but I didn't realize she was *that* sick. And he'd said she wanted to see him married. To see her grandkids. She won't get to experience any of that now. I'm nearly heartbroken for him. How is he taking this news? A part of me longs to know. I don't care how ill-mannered he is – losing someone you love is one of the most painful things in the world – doesn't matter how old they are.

"That's crazy," Zahara says, walking over to my desk.

Greta turns around and we're all looking at each other trying to reconcile this.

"Dang. That's gotta hurt. I can't imagine," Zahara says.

"Yeah," Greta says. "I was all to pieces when I lost my mama. Whew. This is something. We'll have to send him some flowers or something."

I nod.

Greta says, “Look, we all know Mr. DePaul is a hard boss to get along with, but the reality of it is, he’s human and he has feelings just like us. Let’s try to be supportive.”

“Yeah,” Zahara says.

I nod again. I don’t have much to say. I’m actually worried about him. The Essex outside of the office is a more sensible man – the man who took me to lunch and helped me paint my accent wall. The man who bought me furniture. I wonder how he’s doing with all of this.

Realizing it’s not my place to inquire about his family business, I just sit here and think about what I could possibly do to show my support. Even though he’ll probably act like he doesn’t, I think he needs it more than anything right now.

# Chapter 22

Essex



I don't think my mother's passing has fully hit me. It's surreal. I can't wrap my mind around it. My father – he's tough – graciously welcoming people into his home who've been stopping by since Monday night to offer their condolences. I've never seen this many flowers in one place. I know most of these people, but haven't seen them in ages. Many of them still remember me from my younger years. They're shocked at my transformation, so much so that this gathering of people who are supposedly here to support us during this difficult time are more interested in talking about how I was a *chubby lil' thang*. One of my mother's friends said every time she saw me, I was putting something in my mouth. It's like making fat jokes without just coming out with it. No matter how much you've leveled up, people are quick to remind you of how you *used* to be. All the recollections of the past are making me feel like I never grew up. Like I'm still Stewart.

Mother didn't want me to change. She griped about it every chance she got and now, I have to live with knowing I wasn't the man she wanted me to be. That's a kick to the gut. It's something I can never make right because she's gone.

I step outside to get some air. In Florida, I don't care how hot it gets – there's always a breeze to be had, and I desperately need this one passing through me. I had to get away from the constant reminiscing about mom like she's been dead for years and she only just died yesterday. That's still

hard for me to believe. I'm sure it will hit me one day when I least expect it.

“Hey.”

I turn to the woman's voice. I know her – she's a pretty Caucasian woman with hazel eyes and jet-black hair – tall like a model. Her name is Jessica. My mother tried to set us up a few years ago. She owns a boutique mom frequented and apparently, they talked about me a lot. She and my mother became good friends over the years and I'm not surprised to see her here. I wasn't interested in Jessica, but I always thought she was a pretty woman – just not the pretty woman I want.

“Hi, Jessica.”

Her eyes are weary. She's not crying at the moment, but I can tell she has been. She says, “I just stopped by to express my condolences. Sylvie was a good woman. I'm going to miss her coming into the store, always talking about you. She adored you.”

I crack a smile and say, “Thanks for that.”

“She really did. I could hear the excitement in her voice when she talked about you. Anyway, I just—I wanted to say that.”

“Thank you for stopping by. I appreciate it.” I turn away from her and resume my alone time, staring off into the distance. This sitting around and talking about her nonsense isn't for me. I'd rather be left alone with my own thoughts and feelings on the matter. I don't need to reminisce. I need to distance myself from it – clear my mind of this.

That's why when Thursday comes around, I find myself right back at work, wondering why everyone is looking at me like I have a target on my forehead. When I get off the elevator, Ms. Davison's eyes grow bigger than globes. She stutters, “Sir, I—I didn't expect you back so soon. I'll get you some coffee.”

I keep on walking. While I'm back, I'm not in the mood for conversation – for anything, really. I just want to work, but

when I log into my email, I see a bunch of replies from an email with ‘Sad News’ in the subject line. I click on one of them. It’s a ‘sorry for your loss’ message. I click on another one – ‘you’re in my prayers’. I find the original message and it’s an email Shanice sent out to the entire company.

Unbelievable.

I stand up, gearing to confront her about it, when I see a card on my desk. A card...

I tear the envelope away from it and read it. It’s one of those premade cards with some generic sympathy message. After the standard message, are the words written in cursive:

*Sorry for your loss. Quintessa*

Sitting back down again, I immediately pull up the messenger app to question her about this.

**Essex to Quintessa:** why did you give me a card?

**Quintessa to Essex:** you’re back??

**Essex to Quintessa:** I asked you a question

**Quintessa to Essex:** I wanted to show my support...show that I care

**Essex to Quintessa:** nobody cares, and I don’t need your store-bought, generic piece-of-crap card or your feigned sympathy. I’ll have Ms. Davison bring it back to you.

**Quintessa to Essex:** wait...are you joking?

**Essex to Quintessa:** The card is nothing but something you picked up from a Walgreens and signed...required absolutely no effort. None!

**Quintessa to Essex:** so I guess the card bought itself and jumped up on your desk.

I place my messenger on DO NOT DISTURB so ensure I don’t get any more messages from her or anyone else, take the perfunctory card and head out of the office with it, straight for Ms. Davison’s desk.

She glances up, sees me coming and I swear the woman’s entire face goes pale. “The coffee is still brewing, Mr. DePaul.”

“Forget the coffee. Did I ask you for coffee? I’ll answer that. No! I never asked you to have coffee waiting for me in the mornings. You—you take it upon yourself to do things I

never ask you to do. Like the email you sent out on Monday about my mother—what would make you think that was okay?”

“Sir, I was just trying to support you in this difficult time. I didn’t mean—”

“If you want to support me, do what I ask you to do! Nothing more, nothing less. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

I slam the card and ripped envelope on her desk and say, “You can start by taking this downstairs to Ms. Bailey.”

“Okay, sir. I’m on it.” She springs up, takes the card and walks as fast as she can in those sky-high heels toward the elevators.

I go back to my office, sit down and hang my head trying to figure out how I’ll get any work done with all the craziness going on in my life. It’ll be nearly impossible, but I have to do it. What else is there for me to do besides sit with my father while he relays stories about my mother to anyone who would listen? My mother is gone. It’s too soon to hear stories about her life when just a few days ago, she was walking this earth.

# Chapter 23

Quintessa



“Excuse me, Quintessa, I was told to give this back to you,” Shanice says discreetly, lowering a ripped envelope and card on my desk – the card I gave to Essex.

Unbelievable! He had her bring it back to me. At this point, I don’t know what kind of individual I’m dealing with, but nothing is coming across as *normal*. His behavior is unacceptable, and I, for one, will not accept it anymore.

I’m fed up.

I’m so fed up with this man, I feel like jumping up out of this chair to go tell him about himself.

Anger is steering me in that direction. Like all the other times where I’ve bit my tongue, I cannot do it this time. I gather up the ripped envelope and the card and head toward the elevator.

*Turn around, Quintessa. Turn around. It’s not worth losing your job over. You just got an apartment. How are you going to pay your bills if you barge into this man’s office? You know he ain’t wrapped tight.*

I dismiss those warnings while stepping into the elevator. I press the twelfth-floor button. I know I’m too far gone when my voice of reason can’t keep me in check. I guess I’m *blanking*. Is that what they call it when you just don’t care anymore? When you have to say what you have to say without any regard for the consequences?

The elevator doors open to the twelfth floor. I get off and it feels like I'm walking in slow motion like the good guys do in action movies right as something explodes.

Shanice sees me, glances at my hand to see I have the card, and then she looks at my face.

She stands up and says, "Ms. Bailey, stop! You can't go in there. You don't *want* to go in there. Trust me."

I keep on walking, ignoring her warning and the terrified look on her face like her job is on the line if I make it to Essex's office without her stopping me. That's what she gets for wearing six-inch stripper heels to work. She can't catch me. Even if she could, ain't nobody gon' stop me from getting to his office.

Got me messed up...

I understand his mother just died. I get it. But he was like this before she died. And if you want to be this person, fine, be that person. But don't be nice to me outside of work, then when you're here, you act like a psychotic idiot – got everybody walking around here on pins and needles. Not today!

I pull the door to his office, immediately blinded by the all-white office. The massive L-shaped desk he's sitting behind is white. The chairs that face his desk are white. The area rug is predominantly white with black checkerboard patterns on it. The keyboard, monitor, mouse, wet bar, bookshelves – they're all white. I feel like I'm inside of a space capsule – fitting since I'm stuck in the twilight zone. He's on the phone with someone on speaker and I couldn't care less.

I say, "You have a lot of nerve! You know that!"

He looks up and sees me. His lips trim to an intolerable, harsh line. A frown instantly comes to his face. He says, "Mr. Cruz, I'll have to call you back."

He presses the button on the phone to end the call, then leans back in his chair, clicking a pen in his right hand. The frown gradually fades until he's void of emotion, but from



what I know about him, he's fuming. Right now, my mind won't let me care.

Shanice finally makes it to the office and says breathlessly, "I'm so sorry, Mr. DePaul. She walked right past me. I tried to stop her."

"Go back to your desk, Ms. Davison. I'll take care of it."

"Okay," she says and leaves like the puppet master instructed her to.

His burning eyes set heavily upon me when he says behind clenched teeth, "What right do you *think* you have to barge into my office?"

"What right do you have talking to me like I'm some *idiot* you don't know? Let me remind you, *Mr. DePaul*—you're the one who wheedled your way into my life. I've never asked you for anything. I didn't ask you for this weird job, a jacket, didn't ask you to have lunch with me, buy me furniture or help me paint. I've never *asked* you to do anything for me. I do something as simple as buying you a card, and you throw it back in my face like it's nothing when I was genuinely concerned about you and your loss. I figured it must've been devastating for you to lose your mother, but since you're right back at work and back to being a jerk, I see now I was wrong."

"You have no idea what you're talking about, so here's what I suggest you do," he says, standing tall, looming like a cobra, ready to strike. He flicks the pen across the room. "I suggest you go back downstairs and *do...your...job* before your mouth writes a check your behind can't cash."

"Oh, we're throwing out *suggestions* now? I have one for you. I *suggest* you seek some mental health services because if my mother just died like three days ago, there's no way I'd be at work. Oh, and I also *suggest* you learn how to talk to people before you find yourself alone, staring at expensive empty walls, wondering why life passed you by so quickly without you being able to form an emotional attachment to anyone. Aren't you tired of being a cold, empty shell-of-a-person?"

And now he's taking slow, intimidating steps toward me.

*Crap! You've done it now, Quintessa.*

I'm so livid, I have tears in my eyes, but they won't fall. I won't let them. I don't want him to think he's finally broken me. And I'm not wrong in this. Not wrong at all! *He's* wrong, and because of who he is, no one has ever had the balls to tell him that.

He stops a foot away from me and asks, "Are you done?"

I look up at his darkened gaze and for a moment, I fly into the depths of his eyes, completely mesmerized – temporarily forgetting I hate this man. I absolutely hate him! "Yeah, I'm done," I say and slam the card into his chest. "I'm so done!"

I turn away from him, stomping toward the door to escape his presence – this building – and close this chapter in my life. I'm prepared to find another job because I'm certain this is it for me. I can't take any more of this man.

Before I can reach the door, Essex grabs my arm and walks me backward until my back is touching the wall. I literally have nowhere to go – being held hostage by my adversary while his eyes bore into me. Stalk me. I have no idea what he's doing to me. All I know is I'm stuck between two hard places – his body and the wall. I'm completely at his mercy. I'm too afraid to look at him, but I have to in order to understand what he's thinking. My heart beats frantically when I recognize the lust in his eyes and feel his strong hands cup my face, angling my head up toward him like he's angry.

My body trembles, but it's not because I'm afraid of him. This trembling has more to do with desire than fear. My heart beats rapidly. Chemistry burns between us. I place my palms flat against his chest to push him away, but he grabs my wrists, lowers my arms then nearly in a growl, he says, "You should've left when I told you to."

In the blink of an eye, he lowers his head and captures my mouth. My once defiant arms are now wrapped around his neck.

His lips to mine have produced a spark between us that has the potential to grow into a wildfire. He kisses me so hungrily,

greedily, without regard. I feel his strength as he purposely presses his chest to mine – as he groans and deepens the kiss and by deep, I mean his tongue knows the love language of mine. He's relentless, fiercely tackling my lips, nibbling and borderline biting them like he's trying to eat them, releasing his frustration, and fulfilling desire simultaneously. He slides one hand to the nape of my neck and locks it there like a vice grip, holding me in place while he gets his feel of my mouth. I hear myself moaning. I can't believe he's taken me there. He kisses the anger right away from me. All the things I said to him I now want to recant. He's torn down my walls, my defenses and now, I'm back to square one – irritated, enamored and thoroughly confused by him. And while he kisses me with unrelenting strokes, I read into it. Dissect it. I taste desperation on his tongue. I feel his desire to be wanted. To be understood. To be needed. Wanted. Loved. The man with everything doesn't have *everything* after all. He *wants* to feel something. The problem is, he doesn't have the discipline or any emotional control to be in a proper relationship – hence his uncanny attachment to me – a nobody.

He pulls away from me, nearly snatching my lips off my face in the process. I gasp and touch my lips, expecting to see a twinge of blood after the way he's kissed, sucked, and nipped on them, but there's nothing. He doesn't say a word – he just looks at me. I'm staring back at him. Speechless.

I catch my breath and move away from him.

“Tess,” he breathes in a whisper.

I open the door and almost sprint to the elevators because I'm not fully understanding what just happened. One minute he's mad at me and the next, he has me pinned to the wall, giving me a tongue-lashing.

This is confusing.

This job has been challenging since day one.

It's only going to get worse from here.

I don't know how much more of this I can take. I can't decipher what I'm feeling right now.

I tell Greta I'm not feeling well. She doesn't need to know why. I just don't. It's around eleven in the morning when I'm out of there. I go straight to Ella's place because I can't take these thoughts home with me. I wouldn't be able to function.

She's working while I'm filling her on the latest chaos that is my life, but it wasn't until I told her Essex kissed me that she stopped typing and turned around.

"What!" She covers her mouth with her hand. "When? Where? Why?"

"The *when* was this morning at work. Where...his office. Why? I have no idea. It's like he was mad at me. It was an angry kiss. Even when he ended it, he stepped away from me and was frowning. I don't know, Ella. It's just weird. Everything is messed up now. I don't know if I can work there anymore."

"Well, you can't quit. You just got your place, Quin. I would hate for you to lose it."

"I know. Maybe I can find another job fairly quickly. Or I could call Dominion back to see if they'd filled the position I had applied for. I don't know what else to do. I know I'm not going to work tomorrow. I can't look at him after what happened between us. Anyway, I just needed to vent. I'll get out of your hair."

"Girl, stop. You can stay as long as you want."

"No, I should go. I'll see you later."

Ella sighs. "Okay, Quin. Just try to relax. It may not be as bad as you think once you've fully processed everything."

She's right, so after I arrive home, I take a shower and lay on my bed processing what's happened. Every time my eyes close, I see Essex's face. I feel his lips – his pectorals beneath my hands. My body shivers in response to his tongue touching mine and what he did to me. I try to brush it off as insignificant, but I can't do that when I relive it over and over again and still feel his emotions. I've learned things after being connected to his mouth – things I probably wouldn't have otherwise picked up on.

Essex is a man of passion. He's not the tyrant he wants everyone to think he is. There's a real man underneath all that tough skin who wants to be loved, just like there's a yearning deep within my soul to experience the purity of a connection with someone.

But not just *any* someone...

I want a man who's extremely masculine but can be gentle when he needs to be. Firm but not unyielding. A man who put my needs ahead of his own without hesitation. A man who knows how to treat people with respect. Is that Essex DePaul?

No.

But then again, maybe.

I'm completely ambivalent about my feelings for him. They ride the fence – don't jump off on one side or the other – just ride it. That's why I need to distance myself from him and this situation, but that's easier said than done when the taste of his lips – his mouth – resides on my tongue like it's taken permanent residence there. And here's the thing – they say you don't miss what you never had. But I've had his kiss and with a kiss like that, I know I'll miss it which is why I can't fully write him off though it's what my brain is telling me to do. The rest of my body – that's another story.



I hope you've enjoyed Rude Boss (DePaul & Company, Book 1)! Please take a moment to rate or review this book on Amazon. For more information on Rude Boss 2, visit [www.tinamartin.net](http://www.tinamartin.net) for updates!

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\*Books 5-8 can be read as standalone books.

[Dilvan's Redemption, Book 5](#)

[His Charity Challenge, Book 6](#) (Heshan Alexander and Charity Eason)

[Different Tastes, Book 7](#) (Tamera Alexander and Preston Michaels)

[As Long As We Got Love, Book 8](#) (An Alexander Family Novel)

**Non-Series Titles:**

\*Individual standalone books that are not part of a series.

[Secrets On Lake Drive](#)

[Can't Just Be His Friend](#)

[Falling Again](#)

[Vacation Interrupted](#)

[The Crush](#)

[The Baby Daddy Interviews](#)

[Wasn't Supposed To Love Her](#)

[What Wifey Wants](#) (Follow-up to *Wasn't Supposed To Love Her*)

[Man of Her Dreams](#)

[Bae Watch](#)

[How To Love Me](#)

[Weekend Fiancé](#)

[For Ruby](#)

[Marriage Quarrel in Quarantine](#)

[Dying To Love Her](#)

[Snowed in at Shenandoah Valley](#)

[The Dare and Deja Chronicles](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tina Martin writes romance that pulls at your heart strings. There's something for everyone – super novels, novels, novellas and short stories. Come join the club to find out your favorite tropes: secrets, super-rich alpha males, fake marriages, marriage of convenience, workplace romances, friends-to-lovers, sci-fi romances, enemies-to-lovers, and women who know what they want. Discover your next favorite read at [www.tinamartin.net](http://www.tinamartin.net).

Tina loves to hear from readers. If you like her books, like her pages:

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