

THE ALPHA KING CALL BOY

Chapter 46 Our Bodies Belonged Together

Third person

“It has been only five days, Alexander, and already Fiona has recouped the company millions of dollars. Millions! That no one else even noticed was going missing... for ten years.”

Alexander’s eyebrows shot up. “Please explain that scenario.”

Conrad caught him up on the account that Fiona had dug into, explaining how she found a billing error that slipped past even the bank’s notice. And how she even managed to recover the money immediately from the bank, who admitted fault and even agreed to offer a settlement to the affected vendor, as well.

Alexander was a stoic man, a soldier, and not one to show emotions – not even surprise. But though his face remained unchanged, Alexander suddenly rose to stand, shoving his hands into his pockets and walking across the room. He stopped at the window, looking out into the distance.

A long, tense minute passed as he contemplated in silence.

“Who is responsible?” he asked at last.

“Directly? I’ll send you a list of the associates on the account. Clerks too. Anyone who should have seen and reported the error. There are a lot of them, though, Alexander. I don’t know if we could handle firing them all at once...”

Alexander ran a hand through this golden hair before

turning back around to face his uncle. “I’ll figure out how to deal with them later. Let’s get back to Fiona.”

The left side of Conrad’s mouth crept up into a half-smile. “She’s good,” he said, shaking his head like he didn’t believe it himself.

“I told you that she was.” Alexander rejoined Conrad, sitting across from his uncle at his desk.

“And, once again, nephew, you were right. Now listen, I want her to look at a few more projects before we start her on the expansion. She’s good – really good – but she’s still got a lot to learn about our operation.”

“Makes sense. Have you spoken to her about the expansion yet, though? Does she know exactly what she was hired to do?”

Conrad’s mouth moved around in a series of frowns

and odd shapes. Finally, he said, simply, “Not yet.”

Alexander nodded.

“Soon,” Conrad continued, snatching up a mint-flavored toothpick from a tiny cylindrical container on his desk. “I need a little time to iron out the proposal. And get it to you for approval before we show her.”

“Send it to me tomorrow. The sooner Fiona knows what we need her to do, the sooner she can start figuring out how to do it.”

Conrad gnawed on the toothpick, gritting his teeth.

“The girl probably doesn’t need to start worrying about her competitor yet,” he added. “Not until she’s ready to act against her.”

Alexander looked his uncle in the eye. “She’s ready.”

The toothpick snapped noisily in Conrad's mouth, and he quickly disposed of it. "I'm sure you're right," he told his nephew. "As always."

Alexander

Fiona was fast asleep by the time I made it back to the palace. I smiled, relieved to see her resting, and amused at the scene that awaited me behind our bedroom door.

She had been staying up late all week, working, even though I kept telling her that her body needed more time to rest. She would promise she only needed a minute more – then another minute more – and so on until she outlasted me and I fell asleep at her side, with the rattle of her fingers on the keyboard click-clacking lightly like white noise, lulling me to sleep.

But tonight, she had passed out with all the lights on.

Her laptop was on the floor beside the bed, lying open on its side. And she was curled up in a ball, lying in bed atop all the covers, with a single pillow flat under her heavy head. Her silver hair was tied back loosely in a messy bun that trailed loose curls in all directions.

Fiona was always a picture of perfection. It was hard to believe she was her father's daughter, in fact. She embodied the noble role of Luna as well as any I had ever known. It was rare, and felt sweet to see her like this, though. Looking childlike and vulnerable.

I tiptoed around the room, turning out all the lights except for one at my own bedside, trying not to make a sound. I closed her laptop carefully and set it on her nightstand. Then I stood for a moment, looking down upon Fiona with a small, irresistible smile on my lips.

She was still in the dress she had worn to work. I frowned, knowing I could not let her sleep in it, but not

sure if I would wake her up if I tried to take it off.

I decided to first maneuver the covers down from underneath her, first. Then I slipped my hand carefully down the top of her back, feeling for a zipper.

Fiona let out a sigh and stirred her body, making me freeze for fear of rousing her. But then her breathing became regular again, and I dared to pull the zipper down slowly, all the way to the small of her back.

From there the only option was to roll her over and slide the dress down the length of her whole body. But she was out cold, sleeping more soundly than I'd ever seen her do, and I got away with it.

This left her in a short black slip made of silk that she had been wearing under the dress. That would have to do for a nightgown. It was loose, except for right at the largest part of her pregnant belly, where it was stretched taut.

Fiona was visibly pregnant now, no matter what she wore. Her thin, athletic frame was unchanged, but her belly was rounder all the time, and her breasts were growing fuller, too.

I pulled the covers up around her, tucking the silk sheets and warm blankets around her shoulders and hips.

Before climbing into bed myself, I took a quick shower. Then I slid under the covers quietly, still careful not to tear Fiona out of her slumber, and inched my body close to hers. I draped one arm around her waist, letting it come to rest gently on her stomach.

Fiona's body relaxed back into mine comfortably, and I pulled the blankets tight around us both. I pressed my mouth and nose to her neck, breathing in her

scent. She smelled like lavender and vanilla. And like a fresh, cool wind whipping across a meadow.

This woman was the daughter of my enemy. Yes.

But she was also so much more.

She was brilliant. I knew Uncle Conrad would not regret hiring her, but even I could not have expected the impressive feat Fiona had achieved in only her first week of work in our firm. She was devoted, ambitious, and persistent. Unstoppable, even.

And lying beside her with our limbs entwined, our skin in contact, and her smell flooding my senses, I knew, too, that our bodies belonged together.

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Chapter 47 She Was A Genius



Third person

Fiona strode into her boss's corner office, carrying a neat stack of paperwork.

Conrad was pacing the room while speaking on the phone by way of a headset tucked into his right ear. It was invisible under his thick, dark gray hair, except for a tiny blue light that blinked intermittently when he was on a call.

His back was to the door, but he sensed Fiona standing there and turned, waving her inside.

“Close the deal today,” the CEO barked into the air. Then he put his finger to his ear briefly, pressing a button to hang up his call without another word.

“I have the reports you asked for,” Fiona said quickly, not waiting for Conrad to greet her or even make his way over to the desk, where she was placing her paperwork in three tidy stacks beside his computer. She knew by now that her boss did not like to chat, and she had grown accustomed to patiently delivering her work to him in the small gaps between his busy schedule, never taking offense at his gruff demeanor, even when he ignored her completely at times.

Conrad looked at his watch. “Early,” he said, frowning. “You’re done with all the accounts? I told you I didn’t want to see any of the reports until all three were complete.”

“Yes,” Fiona replied. “I set the code to run overnight and came in early this morning to review the results. I would have had the reports to you before lunch, but I decided to ask a couple analysts to double and triple check all the numbers before I printed the final copies.”

Conrad sat and looked at the work Fiona was presenting to him. He had asked her to review the portfolios of all the company’s biggest accounts and compile updated summaries of all their financials.

Now, he was looking at the completed reports on his desk. They were all labeled and organized in color-coded files. Contracts were collated with brass split pins holding them together in the top left corner, the way he preferred. He could not remember ever training her to do that, though.

Fiona summarized her findings and gave her boss a

quick explanation of the way she formatted the documents. “Everything looks to be in order,” she finished, smiling politely. “No surprises. I do have some ideas for optimizing the way we manage these accounts, though. You will find those recommendations at the very back of each portfolio. We can cut our operating costs if we employ some of these strategies.”

Conrad did not need to open the folders to know that all the paperwork inside of them would be thorough and accurate. Fiona had quickly made it very clear, even in her first few days of working at Crescent Ventures, that she was more than just competent and hardworking. She was a genius, smarter by far than anyone else Conrad had ever employed. In fact, sometimes he wondered, uncomfortably, whether she might be even smarter than him.

Fiona rose to stand. “I’ll let you get back to work. I

should catch up on my email, anyway, before I go home.”

Conrad narrowed his eyes. “When did you get in this morning?” he asked, looking Fiona up and down.

Fiona held herself together as a professional every minute that she was in this office, but the pallor on her skin betrayed her exhaustion.

“Four a.m., I think?” She shrugged.

“Go home,” he said, his voice loud and commanding as always. “You’ve done enough for one day.”

Fiona returned his critical gaze and said, “I have more work to do though.”

“You’re no good to me if you work yourself to death.” Conrad put a toothpick into his mouth and stood. He walked to the door of his office in a few large strides,

put one hand on the door and used the other to motion for Fiona to exit. She moved past him obediently.

Fiona

I sighed as my body dropped heavily into the back seat of the car that would return me to the palace, grateful for Conrad's uncharacteristic moment of kindness and understanding, or whatever it was that made him decide to send me home early.

Shifting my weight uncomfortably, I glimpsed my reflection in the rearview mirror as the driver rounded a corner up a highway onramp. I had deep purple circles under my eyes, and my skin looked ashen. I started to understand how an employer might want a pregnant lady who looked like this to get out of his office and off her feet.

The walk from the front of the palace to our bedroom in the West Wing felt longer than usual. I was out of breath by the time I reached the door, my mind fixated on the relief that awaited me when I could finally get my body resting horizontally in bed.

Alexander, looking sharp in a dark blue suit, was standing near the door buttoning his jacket, just about to leave. He turned to look at me, his amber eyes narrow, and said, “You’re home early.”

“I went in early this morning,” I offered in explanation. But I knew what I looked like and was sure that Alexander understood I had come home to rest.

I began to settle in, using up the last of my energy to get my shoes and briefcase put away tidily. Alexander followed me to the bed as I eased down onto it atop the covers with all my clothes still on. He stroked my cheek, his big hand running gently down my neck and

coming to rest under my chin.

It made my eyes flicker closed for a moment, and my throat unconsciously released a low Mmm sound under his warm touch.

But he said, “I will be back in just a few hours,” and slowly ran his hand down the length of my body just once before covering me over with a blanket and tucking it tightly around my shoulders.

I felt like frowning and pouting, not wanting him to leave. But that would be no way for a proper Luna to behave. I gave Alexander a single nod of acknowledgement instead, and then let my heavy eyelids fall indifferently closed.

He lingered at the bedside for a moment. Though my eyes were closed, I could feel that his were on me, his intense gaze almost as tangible as the touch of his

hand.

It was not my place to question Alexander about his business. Or about anything. But my mind could not help but wonder about where he spent so much of his time. Maybe I felt jealous of whatever it was that kept his attention, and his body, away from me.

Eventually he drifted away from my side, and then the sounds of diminishing footsteps and the door opening and closing told me he was gone.

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Chapter 48 He Deserves To Suffer



Alexander

“You were right once again.” Uncle Conrad grinned at me from across his desk. “Fiona is ready. And she is even more capable than I could have imagined. I am confident that she can handle the expansion project.”

My uncle was a difficult man to impress, and only one thing could make him smile like that – money.

“What has she done now?” I asked. “Recovered more unnoticed losses?”

He cocked his head to the side. “She has found some creative opportunities to improve our operations.”

A smile forced its way across my lips. “I am not surprised to hear that. And does she have a plan for how to address those opportunities, as well?”

“Indeed. I intend to have a team start implementing her solutions first thing in the morning.”

I nodded, feeling pleased that Fiona was exceeding my uncle’s expectations. I knew she would not let me down. “And have you finished the proposal?”

Conrad produced a thin file from a desk drawer and passed it to me. “Once you approve this, I’ll sit down with Fiona and go through it with her. If there are no further delays, we could launch the project as early as Monday.”

“I’ll look it over tonight.” I took the file and stood. I did not want to delay my return to the palace any longer than necessary, remembering the fatigue I saw on Fiona’s pale face when our paths had crossed briefly on my way out of the palace. I already felt guilty about leaving her side when she was in that condition, and I wanted to make good on my word to return to her

quickly.

Conrad had called me after he sent Fiona home. His concern about her health, I knew, was nothing sentimental. He simply wanted to ensure my fiancée's wellbeing out of respect to me. And, undoubtedly, also to protect what he now saw as an asset to our business. On the phone he had implored me to take the opportunity of her absence this evening to meet in his office for a discussion of urgent business.

I presumed our business was concluded once I had the expansion project proposal in hand, but Conrad cleared his throat and said, "There's another matter we should discuss, as well." Then he jerked his head to the side, indicating he wanted to take the rest of our meeting outside. He removed his earpiece and set it on his desk, then led the way out to the rooftop deck.

The wind lashed at us wildly the moment we stepped outside, making Conrad's private smoking area null for its usual purpose. But my uncle did also enjoy using his high-altitude rooftop for its other unique trait – total isolation for private conversations.

“It is time to set our other plan in motion as well, nephew,” Conrad shouted over the noise of the whipping wind, which crashed around us as loud and fast as ocean waves. “And I believe that Fiona is going to provide us with the perfect opportunity to make it happen.”

I raised a questioning eyebrow at my uncle. “And how is that?” I asked, already knowing I was not going to like the answer.

Third person

Conrad put his hands deep in his pockets and closed

his eyes. He liked the feeling of the wind up here, despite how uncomfortable most would find the sensation of being slapped in the face and body by sharp blasts of icy air. But it made him feel awake and alive.

“I know you would like to kill the man with your own hands,” he said to his nephew. “But there is another way. A way to avenge your mother but keep your hands clean.”

Alexander’s face became serious. He hardly needed to say a word in argument, as his uncle already understood full well how he would feel about such a proposal. He held his tongue and allowed Conrad to finish saying his piece.

“The money that Fiona is bringing in has already changed things for us, Alexander. And if the expansion succeeds under her leadership, we stand

to double our annual revenue. Or more.”

“And what exactly is your point, uncle? What are you proposing we do with the money? Hire a hit man?”

Conrad smiled. “It’s an idea,” he said, his voice edging on excitement. “A professional can make an assassination look like an accident. We will still get what we want, but we will also minimize our risk of damaging fallout.”

Alexander wiped his mouth with his hand. “You know exactly why we cannot do that,” he said. “He deserves worse than that. He deserves to suffer.”

Conrad put one hand on his nephew’s shoulder, turning his body so they were eye-to-eye. “But you do not. Consider this. If you do what you really want to your mother’s killer – rip his throat open with your teeth, tear his beating heart out of his chest – you will

make yourself more vulnerable to your other enemies. You could be giving your stepmother the very noose she needs to hang you with.”

“I am not afraid of my stepmother.” Alexander’s tone was calm, but his eyes were serious. “And we cannot trust anyone enough to bring another party into this. You and I have long agreed on that point.”

Conrad nodded seriously. “Yes, I have agreed with you on that in the past. But money is opportunity, nephew, and with a lot of money, we can buy a lot of discretion.”

He knew that he would not sway Alexander’s opinion on this subject in a single conversation. His nephew was a man of high honor, a warrior and a leader who did not allow others to fight his battles for him.

Alexander’s long golden hair was being tousled all

around by the wind, looking like a lion's mane. "We are not going to use Fiona as a pawn against her family," he said, surprising Conrad with what felt to the older man like a change in subject.

"Fiona's involvement would be indirect," he replied, frowning. "I am merely suggesting we make use of a resource that our new star employee has brought in. It's only business, Alexander."

In truth, Conrad had been thinking a lot about the many other ways he and his nephew could exploit their closeness with Fiona, as they worked to craft the perfect plot to kill her loathsome father. But he knew Alexander would not find these other, more nefarious ideas palatable at all, considering how protective the young Alpha tended to become when the topic of his pregnant fiancée was at hand.

When Alexander did not reply, Conrad added, "I only

ask that you consider it, son.”

Alexander gave his uncle a slight nod and exited the rooftop without another word. Conrad followed immediately in his wake.

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Chapter 49 Something Had Changed



Fiona

The warm touch of Alexander’s hand lightly stroking my cheek brought me out of a deep sleep, and I blinked my eyes open to find him sitting beside me on the bed.

“I hate to wake you,” he said softly. “But you need to eat something.” He ran his fingers through my hair, his rough fingertips grazing my skin as he did so, sending pulses of warmth into me everywhere he touched. “Are you up for joining me in the dining room, or should I have something brought in here?”

I sat up and found that my energy had improved. “I’ll go with you. I just need a few minutes to change my clothes.”

Alexander’s hand came to rest on my thigh. It was a small touch, but it lit my body up enough to have me thinking about taking his hand and moving it further up my leg. I breathed in his smell as our bodies came closer, and he looked deep into my eyes.

But when I met his gaze, my desire subsided immediately, giving way to tense discomfort.

Alexander was looking at me much too seriously, and something about his energy did not feel right.

Something had changed. In the short time that I had been here resting and he had been out of the palace, something had happened.

I slid out of bed, indifferently allowing his hand to slide off my leg as I stood and walked away. Then I set about the business of making myself presentable, trying to use the activity to press some uncomfortable thoughts out of my mind.

Alexander's affect softened during dinner. The intense, worrisome look in his eyes disappeared without a trace. But returning to our room afterward, he did seem eager to attend to some task in his office with marked eagerness.

Hours later, I was back in bed and reading a

magazine when Alexander emerged from the bathroom half naked in a cloud of fragrant steam, like he always did after his evening showers. My eyes flicked up unconsciously to take in the sight. He caught me looking and smiled smugly.

I forced my eyes back to my magazine article, but I hardly saw the words on the page.

Alexander finished his routine and began turning out lights on his way to bed. I followed his lead, setting my magazine aside. The bed warmed the moment he slid down into the gold silk sheets and started inching his way closer to me.

In the dark, my body took over. I turned toward Alexander and put a hand on his hard chest. He had one of his arms around my waist a second later, pulling my body close to his. I ran my other hand up his scar-covered back. Every inch of it was a reminder

of that cruel night when he was whipped bloody after coming to my defense before the queen. The night when he kissed me.

“Will you look at me?” Alexander asked, his voice a whisper.

I did as he asked, pulling away from his chest and meeting his eyes. I saw in them right away that he was thinking about the kiss, as well. There was no doubt about it. His gaze dropped from my eyes to my mouth, and I licked my lips unconsciously.

He stroked my throat with a feather-light touch, then ran his thumb along my bottom lip. My eyes closed. I could not help but start falling into the good feeling. Feeling his hot breath coming close, I turned my face to the side. His soft lips landed on my neck, sending a shiver down my spine.

But then he sighed and started to pull away.

Whatever had just been getting started, it was suddenly over. Alexander shifted to lie flat on his back. I relaxed my body beside him, with my head on his chest and our limbs partly entwined. The heat pulsing from his body into mine had me melting back down into a heavy, much-needed slumber just minutes later.

“One month.” Conrad handed me a slender file.

“That’s our target for reaching profitability. One month from launch.”

My boss had just given me a long presentation on a complicated and seemingly high-stakes project that he wanted me to lead up. I was already feeling nervous about taking it on, even before he added this final detail.

He raised his eyebrows expectantly. “Can you do it?”

I felt my head bobbing up and down reflexively before I could fully process what I was agreeing to. “I can do it,” I said.

“Great.” Conrad clapped his hands loudly, giving me a slight startle. “Any questions?”

“Oh, I’m sure I will have many questions. But I’ll see which I can answer on my own before bringing any back to you.”

“That’s my girl,” he said, snapping his fingers and pointing at me. “I need to take this.” He pressed his finger to his ear, picking up a call, and started arguing loudly with some anonymous entity without skipping a beat, cueing me to leave.

I returned to my office and opened the folder to review

the proposal again. The scale of the project was like nothing I'd worked with before, with an operating budget that made my eyes widen when I saw the number on the page.

"Knock, knock." A colleague stood in my doorway, pantomiming knocking on the open door.

"Hello." I waved him in. "What can I do for you, Gerald?"

"Well, I was..." His thought trailed off when he spied the proposal in my hands. "Oh, a new project. Is that what you've been doing all morning in Conrad's office?"

I closed the folder and answered, simply, "Indeed, it is."

"Nice," Gerald said idly. "New account?"

I sighed. There was nothing secret about this project, but I was still processing the enormity of it. “Not exactly,” I started to answer. “It’s an expansion of an existing account.”

“Wait.” Gerald’s head dropped suddenly, like an invisible puppeteer cut a string that’d been holding it up. “Is that... that’s not the expansion project, is it? The one they’ve been talking about for years? Conrad... gave you the expansion project?”

I hardly knew how to respond. It seemed full disclosure on my behalf was the only way forward in the conversation, so I opened the file and pivoted it toward my nosy coworker. “I don’t know what you all have been discussing for years, but here is the project proposal. All I know is that Conrad is making it my full-time job to get it off the ground.”

Gerald leaned forward, propping his chin in his hand and his elbow on his knee. “Huh,” he said quietly, his eyes flicking back and forth as he skimmed the first page. “Wow. Yeah, well, that’s the expansion project. That is a big deal, Fiona.” Now he shifted his gaze up to my face, which he began to examine in a way that made me feel uneasy.

“I take it you’re surprised such an important project was assigned to a newcomer?” I asked pointedly, my tone direct but professional.

“Well, I’m surprised they’re moving forward with this project at all. And to tell you the truth, Fiona, this might not be something you, or anyone, can reasonably expect to get off the ground anytime soon.” He squinted at me, looking like he was trying to solve a difficult math problem.

“Conrad seems to think that I can.” I shrugged. “I

suppose we will see how it turns out next month.”

Gerald’s eyebrows shot up. “Next month?”

“Yes. That’s my target and I plan to meet it.”

A dry laugh caught in Gerald’s throat. He made a lazy attempt to pass it off as a cough, covering his mouth with a balled fist until he could compose himself. “I better let you get to it, then,” he said, standing to leave and trying, poorly, to hold back a mocking smile.

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Chapter 50 Failure Is Not An Option





Alexander

“Have you had a chance to think over everything we discussed?”

I winced and lowered the volume on my phone. Uncle Conrad’s booming voice served him well when commanding crowds of subordinates at the firm. But phone conversations with an individual who lacked volume control could be unpleasant.

“I have thought it over,” I told him. “It is not the right time to move our plan forward yet, Uncle.”

I glanced at the door that adjoined my office to the bedroom Fiona and I shared. She had still been fast asleep when I rose early and began my day, creeping around the room in the dark as quietly as I could. It was the weekend, and I hoped she would rest as

much as possible this morning.

“Ah,” Conrad said, failing to mask the disappointment in his expressive voice. “I see.”

“We have been patient on this subject for many years, Uncle. Let’s wait a little longer. We cannot rush this. We must do it right.”

I could hear Conrad frowning as he muttered, “Hmm. Uh-huh. Yes. Of course, you are right.”

My uncle was freshly eager to act against Fiona’s father, and it’s not as though I could blame him. Ever since I saw the despicable villain on the day I stole Fiona away from her wedding, my desire for vengeance had been stronger than ever.

But Conrad’s new impatience did have me wondering what more he might have on his mind, beyond what

he had revealed to me so far. He was spending a lot of time with Fiona now that they worked together. Surely her presence in his life had some sort of influence on his thoughts about our unfinished business with her father.

Delaying our plan had never been an easy thing to do. But waiting for exactly the right time was the only way Conrad and I would be able to make my mother's killer pay for his crime properly – and come away unscathed ourselves.

I returned to the bedroom to find Fiona in exactly the same position where I had left her an hour prior. On her side in bed, with her silver hair splayed all around her head on the gold pillow. But she began to stir at the sound of my movements and soon was looking in my direction with heavy-lidded eyes.

“Hi,” she said sleepily, stretching her arms overhead.

“What time is it?”

I shrugged, making my way over to the bed and taking a seat on the edge next to her. “Still early. How are you feeling?”

Fiona writhed slowly under the sheets, waking her muscles from the stiffness of sleep, and letting out a low mmm sound as she stretched. “I’m good,” she said. “I feel a lot better than yesterday.” She blinked up at me, taking in a long inhale that made her chest heave up and down dramatically, and smiled.

My hand went out to touch her, landing in the valley between her breasts. She looked up at me intently, batting her dark eyelashes, with a look in her eyes that seemed to say: I dare you.

I hardly remember undressing. I was on top of Fiona the next thing I knew, pressing my mouth and nose to

her neck, desperate to breathe in her smell. I could smell her desire for me, too.

Her hands went into my hair, sending chills down my body as she dragged her fingernails across my scalp, and she pressed my face to her breast. I tugged her nightgown down with my teeth, then licked her nipples and watched as she reacted, gasping, the small of her back arching involuntarily.

There was no more waiting after that. I pushed her legs apart and pressed my hips to hers, sliding myself inside her wet heat, making her moan. We clung tightly to each other and fell into a rhythm, moving and breathing together slowly at first, getting faster and more frenzied every minute until she lost control and went, shaking, over the edge of pleasure, taking me along with her.

“Do you really need to work today? Whatever it is you

want to do, I'm sure it could wait until Monday.”

Fiona turned to look up at the ceiling. “I just started a new project, and I have so much research to do. I want to get ahead so I'm not starting from zero on Monday.”

We had collapsed side by side, our bodies still entangled, and laid there for several minutes motionless and panting before Fiona had made a statement about wanting to get up and do some work.

“You need to take care of yourself, too, though, Fiona.” I dragged my fingertips down the length of one of her arms, distractedly enjoying the soft texture of her skin.

She sighed, looking deep in thought. “This project... I don't know. My coworkers are telling me that what Conrad is asking me to do simply cannot be done.

That I'm doomed to fail."

I shifted my weight to prop myself upright against the tufted headboard. "Is that so?"

Fiona frowned and nodded, her eyes still on the ceiling. "I know that this project is important to the company, too. The budget is huge, and I can't be responsible for all that loss if it fails."

I took a drink of water from a glass on my bedside table, nodding. I hoped Fiona would continue, but needed to be careful about saying too much, or really anything at all, on the topic of her work at Crescent Ventures.

"How about this?" she asked, sitting up. She gathered a loose sheet and wrapped it around her chest, then leaned against the headboard, facing me. "I'll take a quick shower, then we'll go eat breakfast together..."

before I come back here and do just a little work.”

“Sounds fair,” I answered.

Fiona looked at me appreciatively. Her blue eyes were light, sparkling, and full of energy. “I’m glad you understand.”

“It’s admirable that you care so much about wanting to do good work. Not many employees would have that kind of dedication after just starting a new job.”

She narrowed her eyes, giving me an intense and penetrating stare that had me, for a moment, concerned I had given myself away somehow.

“It’s not just a job,” she said. “I’ve been entrusted with a tremendous amount of responsibility, and I intend to do right by everyone with a stake in this project. And not only that...” Fiona’s eyes flicked away from mine,

and she fidgeted with the sheet. “This is a chance to prove myself. They’re expecting me to fail, and that only makes me even more determined to succeed.”

She chuckled, her shoulders dropping, then brought her eyes back to meet mine. There was a fresh surge of confidence and passion in them.

“I really don’t know how yet,” she said, “but I am going to make this thing happen one way or another. Failure is just not an option.”

Suddenly I was reminded, vividly, of my departed mother. The fire in Fiona’s eyes felt so familiar, sending me back to a childhood memory that had not surfaced in my mind for many years. My mother had, of course, also been a savvy businesswoman. But that was not all she and Fiona had in common. Fiona’s passion and unrelenting determination to overcome any obstacle in her path... these were

things that reminded me of my mother, as well.

“I have no doubt about that,” I told Fiona. “It sounds like they picked the right woman for the job.”

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