

Chapter 102

AMELIA

I was nervous, but again, I took my time to painstakingly go through the contents of the bag I was carrying. I brought out the bulky file, taking special care not to crease the edges. A glance at the wall clock told me I still had a little time left before leaving to meet with members of the board. I flipped through the file again, checking if I had not forgotten anything essential for the meeting.

The proposal, which I had worked on throughout the previous day and mainly during the night, was good, at least to me. I just hoped the board would not be biased like the mayor had promised.

A hand fell on my shoulders. I flinched a little and almost dropped the files. Before they could slip from my grasp, Damian's hands shot out from behind me. He grabbed it, closed it and handed it over to me.

"I startled you," he said. He came to stand in front of me so he could look me over. "You look stunning... and very smart."

I looked at my clothes: a dark blue pantsuit and matching heels. I had chosen it for the aura of power and confidence it gave me. But maybe I could have worn something better. Maybe Damian was just being kind with his compliments.

"I suddenly don't feel good about my choice. I'm going to change."

"No," he said, shaking his head with a smile. He tipped my chin up so I was looking right at him. "Your choice of clothing is perfect. You look like you are going to bag that project, and I'm confident that you will."

I nodded, hesitated, but decided to voice my fears to him. He was the only one, after all, who I could talk to about this.

"I wonder what the board-

His finger across my lips silenced me. "The board will love your proposal. You will go in there and you'll give them enough reason to throw Noah out. Don't worry about-"

My phone started to ring but I ignored it.

"You know Noah has a way of getting what he wants. What if—"

"Do you want to get that?"

He was referring to my phone which had begun ringing again. I sighed.

"Yes," I dug it out from my purse. "It might be from... It's Rose."

Damian moved away while I took the call. From Rose's very first words, I knew something was wrong. Very wrong. There was some noise, sounds of people talking loudly in the background. It seemed like they were arguing.

"What is going on?" I asked her.

A door slammed shut. I didn't hear those sounds anymore, just the sound of Rose breathing heavily.

"There are some inspection officers here at the bakery," she said. "They are examining everything."

I didn't know what to say. This was surprising news. The office of the inspection unit always gave notice before every inspection so what had changed? Had the head of the unit been replaced? Even if he had been, their department had a code of conduct, didn't they?

"Okay," I said finally. "This is highly irregular, but let them inspect whatever they came to inspect. We have nothing to hide. If there is any problem, give me a call."

"There is a problem already," Rose said quickly. A note of outrage crept into her voice when she said, "They are talking about closing down the place-"

"What?"

"Because of some bizarre violations we are committed."

"What violations?"

"That's the problem, ma'am. They have been talking and I can't make sense of anything they are saying. I'm sure we didn't do anything wrong. They are just -" Rose broke off when a knock sounded on the door at her end. I heard someone call her name. "I think my attention is needed there. What am I to do?"

"Just be calm. I'll be right there."

I hung up and looked up into Damian's worried face.

"Trouble at the bakery, I presume?" I nodded.

"What is going on?"

In very few words, I told him what Rose had told me. "I have to go there right now."

"No."

"No? But the bakery-"

"You don't have to go there... at least not now." Damien sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. He was thinking of something and I knew that. "Don't you think it is unusual that inspection officers decide to visit your bakery on the very same morning you are to meet with the board?"

I blinked, my panic receding a little bit as I thought of what Damain had said. Actually it was unusual.

"Do you think this is a distraction?"

"Yes. I believe a note of inspection should have been sent, right?" I nodded. "Did you get anything from them?"

I shook my head.

Damian spread his hands. "See? Something is fishy here. Be focused. Go to the meeting with the board. I will go to the bakery to find out what's going on."

I shifted uneasily. "Maybe I could just look in at the bakery."

"Trust me. You'll eventually just end up spending the whole day there. I'll handle it."

Another look at the clock told me I had to make a quick choice. I was almost running late. I said a quick goodbye to Damian, instructed my driver to drive me to the council building as fast as he could.

NOAH

The only sounds to be heard in the room was the rustle of paper and the periodic creaking of chairs as the occupants of the room adjusted themselves.

I watched the hands on the clock made a full revolution before clearing my throat and saying, "Gentlemen, I am not sure Amelia... Mrs Donovan is interested in this project. She might have cheated to get the award, and if she did, she is certainly not prepared for a task such as this."

I was treated to a steely stare by all four members of the board.

The bald one said, "Mr Allen, if you please, we would rather not hear such accusations."

"Yes," said the man seated next to him as he glanced at his wristwatch. "We will wait another five minutes for her. Some circumstances may have delayed her but that doesn't give you the right to throw out accusations."

I nodded, and leaned back in my seat while the board members had a whispered conversation amongst themselves. I felt like crowing with laughter.

There was no way Amelia would make it to the meeting. We would all stay in this room and stare at ourselves till they were ready to award me the project.

I smiled and leaned back in my seat, watching as time went by.

Five minutes crept by in a second.

How liberating it would be for me to tell them that they could wait five hours and Amelia would still not show up. I interested myself in watching the clock.

Six minute passed, then seven. I was confident she would not get here in ten minutes. For this, Monique certainly deserved a-

"Good morning, gentlemen."

The sound of Amelia's voice pushed me up from my seat.

She was standing at the door, wearing a big smile as she glanced across the room. What was she doing here?

Monique had assured me she wouldn't show up for the meeting. What the hell!

"Good morning, Mrs Donovan," the board members said almost in unison.

"I'm so sorry I'm late. I got stuck in traffic."

"Oh. That's quite alright," the head of the board said with a gracious smile at her. "Please take a seat so we can begin immediately."

Just as she took her seat, with a smile on her face, she leaned close to me, "Are you surprised to see me, bitch?"

For some reason, a shiver crept up my spine. But I ignored her.

Gritting my teeth in anger, I looked straight ahead. The board members introduced themselves to her and then the head of the board turned to me.

"Mr Allen, we will like to hear your proposal first."

I shook off the shock of seeing Amelia, opened the file I came with, and distributed copies of my proposal to the men. I then launched into my well rehearsed pitch.

"Art, they say is the best form of expression, and I propose building an art gallery or museum where rare and expensive art will be displayed. I will be in charge of procuring the art." I gave them a winning smile. "Now I know this will be a very expensive project. I have put that fact into consideration. However, I have a lot of wealthy individuals in this city who also appreciate art. They will pay a lot to visit this gallery. The place will literally be a gold mine. That is my proposal."

They thanked me and asked Amelia for hers.

"I propose the building of an amusement park," she said.

I snorted a laugh.

The board members shot me stern looks as the room turned silent.

"I'm sorry," I murmured under their quailing stare.

But really? An amusement park? How infantile could she get? An amusement park indeed!

"Please, continue," the board's head urged.

Amelia smiled her thanks. "There are many kinds of businesses in this city but no large recreational center exists. The park will be a project that the wealthy and less fortunate will enjoy, but apart from that, it will provide lots of job opportunities for people, especially women."

"How so?" one of them asked.

"It is common knowledge that most women will likely put up small businesses in amusement parks, businesses that will sustain them. And that is not the only benefit of this project. With the revenue generated from the park, homes for orphans and schools for children with disabilities will be built." With a mocking sideways glance at me, she added, "This is my proposal."

"That is quite... something," the board head chimed immediately.

"I agree. Your idea is quite impressive."

Amelia beamed.

What the hell was so special about a bloody amusement park anyway? How could they compare the resources and structural development of an amusement park to an art gallery?

I fumed. Why hadn't they shown interest in my own proposal? This lot were certainly as dumb as Monique... Monique certainly had a lot to answer for. If she had kept Amelia away as we had agreed, none of this would be happening.

After a brief silence, one of the board members spoke up. "Thank you Mrs Donovan, Mr Allen for your proposals. Please leave the room for some minutes so we can agree on the winning proposal."