

DEFENDING HER DIGNITY

CHAPTER ONE

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To Pedro.

אני לדודי ודודי לי

LAWRENCE

“ROXANNE, PLEASE! I AM BEGGING YOU. YOU CANNOT DO THIS to me! I need you, Roxanne! Roxanne—”

“No, it’s not worth it!”

The woman on the other end of the line yells hysterically between loud sobs that are dangerously close to obliterating my ear drums, even through the phone. “You could give me a million dollars and I wouldn’t stay. I’m done! You can pick her up at school! I’m leaving!”

The call disconnects before I can get another word in, and I let out a groan of frustration, dropping the phone on my desk.

“Shit!”

I had high hopes for Roxanne. Out of the seven other nannies I’d gone through these last sixteen months, she had made it the longest, at a record-breaking three months. I really thought she could have been the one. However, judging by that phone call, that ship has most certainly sailed.

“Mr. Monroe?”

I look up from my desk, surprised to find June, my

father's secretary, standing outside my office door. She wears an apologetic smile, and though I'm embarrassed she may have overheard my outburst, I know from the decades she has spent loyally at my father's side that the many indiscretions and secrets of the Monroes will go with her to the grave.

"Your father can see you now," she continues. "He told me to let you know he only has five minutes."

I push myself out of my seat and follow June to my father's office across the hall. The minute I open the door, I feel every muscle in my body tick with annoyance. Casually sitting on the corner of my father's desk is Peter, the man I used to consider my best friend. Now, though? I wouldn't piss on him if he were on fire. He also unfortunately happens to be my half-brother: the product of a doomed relationship between my father and Peter's mother, my father's mistress of several years.

"Ah, Lawrence. Finally, you're in," he says, and I have to resist the urge to remind him I've been here since six thirty this morning. "Have a seat. I want to speak with you."

I slide into the leather seat opposite my father's desk and offer a curt nod to Peter, acknowledging his presence. The guy is a grade-A asshole. Luckily, even though we both work for the same company, I manage to avoid him most days. He offers me an arrogant smile in return, and I have to shove my hands in my pockets to physically restrain myself from slapping the smirk off that asshole.

"Listen, Lawrence, I've received your proposal for the purchase of this '*Fempower*' magazine," he says as he raises his fingers to mockingly quote the name of the magazine and website I'd spent months painstakingly researching. Shaking his head, he drops my report on the desk. "This is not representative of the Monroe brand, and not something

we would ever consider investing in, Lawrence. And Peter agrees.”

“Of course he does,” I respond through gritted teeth. I had spent months working on the *Fempower* proposal. It wasn’t just a magazine or a website: it was a social media platform aimed at helping young women find internships, volunteer opportunities, jobs, and mentors. It was a safe space for women on the internet to express their interests and share their goals without getting eviscerated by sexist and misogynistic trolls. I had found it after my own ten-year-old daughter had shown it to me. The company was growing too quickly and needed more capital to expand. This had the opportunity to become a game-changer.

“Dad, as you will see from my report, this is a sound investment opportunity. The company is growing daily and needs an influx of capital to support the added growth. If we buy in now—”

“No,” my father interrupts, as the corners of his lips curl in disgust. “This is some new-age feminist bullshit. We are newspapermen, Lawrence. We don’t invest in magazines that compare lipstick shades.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to prevent myself from saying something that I know I’ll regret later and take a deep breath before continuing. “If you looked through my report, you would see it isn’t a beauty magazine. It’s a whole community targeted at empowering women—young women—with thought-provoking, intellectual articles. Teen girls are the fastest-growing demographic in this country. The Monroe brand won’t be around for another decade if we keep all our investments in print journalism. The newspaper industry is dying—”

“Enough Lawrence. We are not going to invest in this little project. Teen girls,” he adds with a snarl, “are not

worth the investment. They are fickle and would rather spend their money at the shopping mall. Let them. We will continue to focus on what has made Monroe successful.”

I keep my composure, but inside I'm boiling with rage. He's wrong. But he's also my boss and more importantly, he is Lawrence Monroe IV and therefore his word is final. I continue to clench my fists, counting down the seconds until I can escape out of here and find a sturdy wall to bang my head against.

My father looks down at me, his eyes narrowing as he assesses me. “Lawrence, it's these types of deals you bring to my desk that concern me.” He shakes his head in disappointment, and I fight the urge to leap out of this chair and say “fuck it” to it all and walk away from this business and all the baggage that comes with it. I restrain, though, and push back my frustration and anger.

“And that is also why I want to speak with you both,” my father continues. “Peter, my boy, why don't you have a seat next to Lawrence?”

Peter picks himself up from the corner of my father's desk and saunters toward me, sliding into the empty seat beside me. Everything about him reeks of sleaze: from his over-gelled hair, to his \$6,000 custom-made suits. The smell of his cologne overpowers me, making me want to gag. Even though we share half our DNA, it physically repulses me now to think that I spent my childhood and early adulthood as best friends with this asshole.

“As you both know, I want to retire soon. I'm not getting any younger, and this business has started to tire me. I need to leave Monroe to someone I can trust will continue to lead my company to even greater success. I brought this company into the twenty-first century and turned over a

seven-billion-dollar profit last fiscal year. I need someone who can continue my legacy.”

Next to me, I hear Peter inhale a sharp breath. He’s a vulture, and he wants this with every cell in his body. All his life, Peter has suffered from feeling like the forgotten child. And, in a way, he was. Though my father acknowledged his existence and even “allowed” him to take the Monroe family name, he was never part of my father’s public life. Never included in the magazine interviews or TV appearances like my sisters and I had been, Peter spent his life trying to prove himself to our father. He would ingratiate himself to him in any way possible, and it wasn’t until I was thrust into fatherhood that I realized how far Peter would go to push me out of the way and claim my spot. For Peter, securing the CEO position at Monroe was more than a promotion: it would finally be the legitimacy and recognition from our father that he had longed for all these years. And because I know him so well, I also know it is lethal to underestimate a man like Peter.

“I am going to be making my decision over the coming months, and I want you both to be on the top of your game.” My father purposefully drags his eyes toward mine and gives a slight shake of his head. “Try to make this difficult for me.”

I ball my fists even tighter at my sides as I swallow the metallic taste of blood in my mouth from biting my cheek so hard. It was literally painful to be in the same room as my father and yet, in the greatest twist of irony, my office is a mere ten feet away from his. Talk about being a goddamn masochist.

My father turns his attention to his laptop, signaling that he is done with us. Peter and I both stand from our chairs as

my father swivels back to look at us, holding up his palm. “Lawrence, stay another minute.”

Peter offers me a smug, shit-eating grin as he saunters out the door. I drop back into the seat, bracing myself for whatever my father now has up his sleeve.

“Peter tells me you won’t let Fiona see her daughter,” my father says.

I close my eyes and rub my temple. Fiona is the mother of Isabel, my daughter. She left us both when Isabel was eight months, though she had checked out long before that. She had decided that she needed to “live her life” and that a baby “cramped her lifestyle.” Overnight, she had left me at home, alone, to raise our daughter. She had eagerly signed away her parental rights for a ten thousand-dollar monthly allowance, and I hadn’t even heard from her in almost two years.

“Dad, Fiona is a liar. And a drug addict. She either snorts the ten grand I send her each month or spends it on some stupid vacation. If she wanted to see Isabel, she would put down the damn bottle of booze and —“

“Enough! That is the mother of your daughter! Show some respect!” my father interrupts, his face growing red as he shouts.

I want to laugh, to remind him that in drunken stupors he would say far worse things about his own wife—my mother—before he would screw one of his nameless whores in the back of his car on his way home from work.

“She gave birth to Isabel. She’s not her mother,” I reply, doing a piss poor job of hiding the bitterness edging its way into my voice.

“Grow up, Lawrence. The girl wants to be part of her daughter’s life. You can’t forbid her from seeing her.”

“Having Isabel at twenty-four years old forced me to

grow up. Fiona never got that memo. And last time she tried to be a part of Isabel's life, I got a concussion from her hitting me with her car. She's unstable, and she chose to get a monthly payout over being a mother. She made her choice. And besides, I wouldn't trust whatever Peter is selling you. He's as psychotic as his sister."

Oh right, I probably should have mentioned that Fiona is Peter's sister. Well, technically his step-sister. His mother married Fiona's father right after I graduated from university. I had been in no rush to join the real world and spent my days on yachts or getting drunk at the country club. The drugs and alcohol were beginning to bore me, and I needed a new addiction. The minute I saw her, I became instantly enamored with Fiona and her flaming red hair. She was wild and full of life. She had no desire to be bound by the polite social conventions dictated to us by our parents, and I was yearning for any excuse to escape and rebel. Our love affair was a whirlwind of decadency, narcissism, and self-sabotage that resulted in Fiona getting pregnant at twenty-one, and making me a single father at twenty-two.

My father slams his hand on the table. "I've heard enough. This attitude shows me you're not ready to take over Monroe."

"Well, then I guess you can have Peter run the company," I bite out as flippantly as I can, to disguise the anger quickly simmering to the surface.

My father gets out of his chair and places his palms on the desk. "Lawrence, I'm done with this company. I dreamed of handing it down to you, but you have been nothing but a disappointment. How many times did I have to bail you out of jail? Pay the local papers and donate to the police fund to cover up your little indiscretions? And then a child out of wedlock at twenty-four..."

“Dad, I’ve made my mistakes and I own them. But as COO, I have run this company damn well. I have made us millions and dedicated my life to this job.”

My father waves his hand dismissively. “It takes more than that to run a company like this one, Lawrence. It takes grit and determination. Long hours and sacrifice.” He slides his glasses off the bridge of his nose and peers down at me. “I had to sacrifice to get where I am. You don’t know the meaning of the word.”

“Dad, I’ve given up everything for this job. I don’t go out, all I do is work and go home to Isabel.”

“Yes, I know all about that,” he responds, a frown crossing his face.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He narrows his eyes down at me, as if I am supposedly to magically surmise what he is so evidently upset about. “Leaving a work dinner early to attend a ballet recital?”

“Yes,” I respond, gritting my teeth. “I left work early to attend my daughter’s ballet recital.”

My father grunts and shakes his head. “Life is full of choices, Lawrence. And trust me when I say, attending a ballet recital is never the right choice. I am prepared to hand you a billion-dollar company. Prove to me that I will be making the right choice.” With that, he opens his laptop and turns his attention to the screen. I’ve been dismissed.

I slide out of my seat, feeling the weight of his disappointment on my shoulders as I open the door and cross the hall back to my office, letting out a curse when I find Peter sitting behind my desk, a picture of Isabel in his hand.

“My little niece is adorable, isn’t she?” he asks as he toys with the silver photo frame.

I snatch the picture out of his hands and put it face

down on my desk. “You mean the niece you haven’t bothered to see in four years?”

Peter chuckles and holds his hands up defensively. “Hey, bro, calm down. Don’t hate the player, hate the game. It’s not my fault I’m crushing it. Someone has to make this company some money.”

I blow out a frustrated breath, my patience running thin. “Peter, leave me the hell alone.”

Peter pushes himself up from my chair. “Got a few things to take care of first, bro.”

His use of the word bro irritates me, and I don’t bother fighting the scowl that leaps to my face at his use of it. The prick knows exactly how to get under my skin.

“Oh, and I had a great chat with Dad last night, too. Heard about his plan for retirement. Seems like he’s eager to find someone who can dedicate enough time to take the big seat.” He looks down at the turned-over frame of Isabel on my desk. “Must be hard to do with a little girl at home.”

I’m tense as I cross my arms against my chest and take a step toward him. “Fuck off, Peter.”

Peter’s smile quickly fades away from his face. “You think because you’re a father that you’re better than me, Lawrence?” He gestures to the framed photo on my desk as his lips curl into a sinister snarl. “What a shame it would be if something happened to your precious little angel. Would you still think you’re so much better than me?”

I know he’s goading me, but I don’t care. In under two seconds, my hands are wrapped around his neck and his back is against my office wall. “Watch your fucking mouth, Peter,” I warn him.

A victorious smile stretches over his face, making me sick to my stomach. “Easy, bro. That’s not the kind of

behavior that daddy dearest wants to see. Luckily he has another option.”

I stare him down, refusing to give him another word. After a long second, I drop my hands from his collar and shove away from him. He offers me one last arrogant smile before spinning on his heel and walking out of my office.

I collapse into my seat and drop my head into my hands. This day could not get any worse. The thought of Peter taking over the company literally makes me nauseous. This was my fucking birthright. I had spent my entire life being groomed to take over Monroe. Fuck Peter. This was *mine* to take.

I need to take my mind off him and figure out this Isabel situation. At ten years old, she was becoming too much of a handful. I relied on a nanny to help shuttle her to school and her extracurriculars while I was at work. But for the past year, every nanny I've hired she has driven away with her tantrums and pranks. Roxanne had outlasted them all, and I had high hopes for her. I have no idea why Isabel is acting out, or why she's doing it now. With me, she's a sweet angel and a complete daddy's girl. She's my weak spot, and it's hard for me to imagine her being cruel to all these nannies. But after seven nannies, I'm beginning to realize this is becoming an all-too-familiar pattern, and my sweet angel may have a hidden evil side.

I type out a quick email to the agency that had sent me the last four nannies. I'm too afraid to call them, and I'm also not entirely confident they have anybody left on their roster to send. I'm going to need to leave work early today to pick up Isabel from school, so I also let my secretary know to clear my schedule for the afternoon. My father's words continue to echo in my head, but I need to push him away and focus on the forty-plus emails in my inbox.

I manage to get in a few hours of work before a soft knock at my door pulls my eyes away from the budget projections spreadsheet I had just spent the last thirty minutes analyzing. I slide off my glasses and rub my eyes, which feel dry and irritated from the hours spent staring at my computer screen.

“So sorry to interrupt sir, but I have an urgent call that came in for you,” my secretary says.

“Who is it, Leila?”

“It’s Isabel’s school. They said they’ve been trying to reach you for an hour.”

I quirk my brow and pull my cell out of my breast pocket. I have four missed calls: all from Isabel’s school.

“Shit,” I mutter. “Send the call in.”

A second later the phone rings, and I quickly pick it up. “Hello?”

“Ah, good, you’ve finally picked up,” a curt and annoyed voice replies on the other end. I feel my stomach sink as soon as I recognize the familiar voice of Isabel’s principal. “This is Mrs. Green over at Isabel’s school. We need you to come right away.”

