

CHAPTER ONE

(UNDOUBTEDLY)

THE MOST IMPORTANT NIGHT

What I can't fix with a ten-mile run, I fix with checklists and ABBA. Which is why fifteen minutes before the most important night of my career begins, I'm sitting in a private booth at the Aviary, one of Chicago's finest dining venues and my go-to for client dinners. "The Winner Takes It All" plays on my AirPods while I mentally run through the "Pitch-Perfect" Checklist I prepared between my morning run and breakfast.

Three more items stand between me and winning the account that could lead to the promotion I've busted my marathon-toned tush for years to win. Three items and I cross the finish line.

1. *Share new marketing numbers—during appetizers*
2. *Deliver final pitch—before dessert*
3. *Keep Rafael in line—all courses*

Most account managers would be anxious about the client dinner itself—the final step in a months-long process of wooing the CEO of OhLaLove, an online dating platform. Instead, it's

sitting across from Rafael Vela that has me wanting to *run, checklist, repeat* before dinner is even ordered.

Five years of working with him have taught me that I should plan for all possible scenarios when it comes to Rafael. Including ones where he swaps out my carefully detailed pitch slides for inspirational Disney quotes or ones where he says we're on the same team—friends, even—and then steals the account we spent a year prepping for. No warning, no explanation, no consequences.

It's the reason item #3 is on the list tonight—and why it's been at the top of all checklists for the last six months. Because when our boss insisted Rafael and I work together on winning the multimillion-dollar, multiyear account, I had no choice but to *suck it up, buttercup* for 182 of the longest days of my life (even if you count the years I lived out of a basement room with mice as roommates and a steady diet of ramen and canned tuna).

So, of course, I said yes to the opportunity. The alternative meant showing the boss I couldn't handle a challenge, which wasn't an option, not when she dangled a long-awaited-for promotion at the end of it . . . for both Rafael and me.

As lead account managers, it's the two of us in line for director of marketing. Refusing to work with him would have been a lot like gift wrapping the promotion for Rafael. And he's had enough handed to him. Accounts. Clients. Discounts to major sporting events.

Tonight, my future rides on winning OhLaLove's business—and winning the business means keeping Rafael from messing things up for us. For me. Again.

I've made it six months working behind enemy lines, watching Rafael like he's a human land mine, triple-checking shared files for signs of sabotage, and keeping *my* pitch notes password-protected. Every team meeting, every strategy session, I've been one suspicious eyebrow twitch away from hacking his Outlook—just to make sure history won't repeat itself. I've spent more time prepping backup plans than actual plans.

Dead Set on You

So what's another few hours?

Enough to make my syncope kick in, that's what.

I imagine fainting into a bowl of boeuf bourguignon, and my stomach churns like a walrus on laxatives. It wouldn't be the first time he's made me faint during a client meeting (a long story that involves scissors and a supply closet), but I swore it was going to be the last.

Because I'm Evie Pope, and I'm in control.

One Mamma Mia.

Two Mamma Mia.

Taking several Rafael-expunging breaths, I straighten and smooth out my black Ted Baker dress, the one I chose specifically for tonight. It's sleek, professional, and the perfect dash of feminine. *Dress for the job you want*, and I've been doing it since my first internship, when I'd use any savings I could scrape together to buy business wear from thrift stores. My first work dress is still hanging in my closet—a reminder that *eventually*, the effort pays off. *Eventually* is a dinner and three checklist items away.

It's just the one item, really, and he's late, even though his apartment is conveniently located across the street from the restaurant (my one mark against the Aviary).

Casting a quick glance toward the restaurant entrance, I reach for one of the three wineglasses and stare down into the burgundy liquid. I don't usually drink before the client arrives, but the longer Rafael hangs out rent-free in my mind, the more I'm tempted to chug straight from the bottle.

One sip.

I bring the glass to my lips as a low, familiar chuckle floats over the din of chatter and dinnerware. I pause and listen.

Rafael's deep, husky voice is a discernible rumble from the rest. Annoyance flares, momentarily dousing my anxiousness. I don't look. I don't have to. No doubt he's taking his time joking with the hostess, talking about the latest sports stats with the

valet, and getting Chef to share a secret recipe because Rafael also “dabbles in cooking.”

With a sigh, I set down the glass, pop out my AirPods, and shove them into my purse as Rafael appears across the restaurant.

Tall and broad, he’s impossible to miss as he saunters over, walking alongside the hostess, who’s staring at him like he’s dessert. Can’t really blame her—it’s part of the Vela effect. All of it is: the signature navy dress shirt, sleeves rolled up to reveal tanned arms, and dark slacks that hug his thighs. The way he runs a hand through his dark-chestnut waves as if to tame them and then casually tucks it back into his pocket. The scruff he sometimes sports is gone, and in its place is a jawline that demands attention. His dark bedroom eyes focus on the hostess as he stops and leans in to say something. She laughs, nudging him playfully, her hand lingering on his arm.

I roll my eyes the moment Rafael’s gaze shifts and snags on mine.

It’s too late to look away, and despite months—*years*—of conditioning myself not to care what Rafael Vela thinks, my cheeks heat at having been caught.

He smirks wickedly, his full lips pulling to one side, and his dimple—his weapon of mass destruction—makes an appearance. Melts my embarrassment into something else entirely.

Hating my body’s traitorous reactions, I glare at him until he reaches the table and slides into his seat, dismissing the hostess with another knee-buckling smile.

“Hey,” he says, his warm voice making me sit straighter.

“Hi.” I avoid—and *deeply* resent—my body’s insurrection to the enemy’s nearness. “You’re late.”

“Had a long commute.” Rafael’s smile turns more devilish.

I know he’s baiting me, and because I’m a consummate professional who absolutely will not lose her calm in the final stretch of this race, I bite my tongue and hold his gaze. Rafael’s eyes don’t stray from mine as his fingers snake around the stem of his glass and lift it, swirling the red wine before he takes a whiff.

Dead Set on You

I think his lips twitch as he brings the crystal to his mouth, downs a big gulp, and smacks his lips. “Not bad.”

I blink. “We’re at the Aviary, not Olive Garden, *Rafael*.”

“It’s hard to tell with the lights so low, *Evie*.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is *rakish*.” Rafael winks, draping an arm on the back of the chair, scanning me in a way that coaxes another heat wave to the surface (much like the onset of a terminal fever).

“Far from it,” I scoff, starting to think it’s ice-cold water, not wine, I need to make it through tonight.

I wouldn’t have had this problem if I’d found a way to keep him from coming, not that I didn’t try. Often and with bribes. I even offered him guest passes to the country club he’s been trying to get into for years, but he’s so far down the wait list, he has better chances working there as a cart attendant. Dangling that exclusive carrot was about as effective as the thirty emails I sent our boss, begging her to let me do this solo. None of it worked. So here he is, going for the promotion he wants as badly as I do.

Am I worried he’ll get it? Maybe. A little bit.

Not only is he good at his job (not that I’d ever admit it out loud, not even on my deathbed), but everyone at Media Lab adores him. He’s got pull, like gravity—effortless, inevitable. It’s infuriating. It’s also what made him my friend once—for almost three years after I joined. We were two junior associates then, tackling impossible deadlines and our boss’s endless expectations. He used to save me from vending machine lunches, and I used to cover for him when he ran late. We had each other’s backs.

Until he didn’t.

Until he made a decision I never saw coming and stopped being someone I could trust.

Since then, staying in the running for the promotion has been a balancing act. While I’ve worked hard to prove myself to Media

Lab's mostly male ecosystem, I've also sprinted like hell to keep up with Rafael, because losing this promotion isn't just about righting a two-year-old wrong. It's about not falling *back*. Back to hunger, homelessness, and all the *lessnesses* I've clawed my way out from.

It's been the marathon with no finish line, and if I'm being honest, I don't know how much more running I have left in me. I've passed too many stops and too many people along the way. Sometimes I wonder if there's a point when it's too late to stop.

I told myself thirty was the finish line. Land the promotion (and its financial security) and then I'd stop running. Then I'd start checking off all the other things I've put off—like the ninety-two items on my bucket list, a real vacation, maybe even a relationship not built on sabotage and sarcasm. Life.

An uneasy, familiar feeling lodges low in my belly, famished for my attention. I shove it aside before it can crawl into the space between my ribs and make itself at home.

"Hey. You feeling okay?" Rafael's voice whips me back to the table. The smirk I've come to associate with his usual smugness is gone, replaced by a different look. A look I've seen on him lately and not yet deciphered. Probably because he hasn't pulled anything nefarious today. No fake calendar invites. No last-minute deck edits. No classic Vela sabotage. Yet.

The silence—that look—makes me nervous.

Because he could be waiting for the perfect moment to wrangle this account—the promotion—from me, and tonight could be it.

"No need to stress, E. You can do this with your eyes closed," he adds, voice low. Almost soft.

"I'm—I know," I snap, surprised and confused. *Did he just compliment me?*

I search his unfairly handsome face. I know every Vela tactic in the book—and none work on me.

"You're so tense, I figured you needed a reminder."

"I'm perfectly fine," I say too quickly.

Dead Set on You

“You’re going to snap the glass in two.” His gaze flicks to my hand.

I loosen my hold. “I’m. Fine.”

“You should be more than fine,” he says.

The suspicion sinks in as Rafael leans forward, features turning conspiratorial, and his scent—aftershave and sandalwood—envelops us. “All we have to do is show Cyril a good time, and it’s in the bag.”

“It’s in the bag? Who says that?” I ask, leaning away from him and his stupidly distracting scent with an annoyed groan. I need to stay on my A game and not let whatever he’s doing throw me off. “In fact, it would be really helpful if you didn’t talk. Not that you even needed to come tonight.”

“And let you have all the fun?”

“*Fun?*” I almost choke. “This isn’t one of your mom-and-pop accounts you can joke your way through. Everything is on the line.” Our boss’s approval. A sizable commission. A chance to slow down. “Do you even—”

“Bonsoir!” Cyril’s accented voice interrupts before I can ensure Rafael gets it.

We stand to greet Cyril—kisses on each cheek—before we settle into our seats. Rafael in front of me. Cyril to my left. The wineglass within sipping distance.

“You look lovely tonight, Evie,” Cyril says, undoing the buttons of his jacket.

“Thank you.” I offer him a strained smile. Rafael’s appears on demand.

“You too, Raf,” Cyril adds, slapping Rafael on the shoulder. My gut cinches at their familiarity—their bromance, which budded on day one—but I keep my features smooth and friendly, focusing on Cyril, a picture of French elegance with styled blond hair and a neat beard. His eyes, like the sky on a cloudless day, are always assessing and calculating and doing none of the things Rafael’s dark-brown eyes do.

Anxiety returning tenfold, I silently pray Cyril goes for the wine quickly so I can follow suit, calm my nerves, and get to Pitch-Perfect Checklist item #1 before #3 has a chance to compromise things.

The server arrives before any wine sipping happens.

I order on the table's behalf as Cyril and Rafael ease into friendly conversation. Rafael is Cyril's favorite, even if I'm the one who scoured the internet and dabbled in some light social media stalking of the CEO, learning as much as I could about him, his business, France, and anything that could remotely impact the future of our working relationship. But Rafael? Rafael bothered with none of this, save for the parts tied to OhLaLove and the online dating market. Yet here they are—fast friends, chatting away about a soccer (football!) match, and I feel like I'm two steps behind.

I take a sip of my wine, then another, and breathe out—*one Mamma Mia*. It's time to get control of things and cross the finish line. But I need Rafael to do that.

As if I've summoned him with my thoughts, Rafael looks at me. Cyril follows.

"Sorry—Raf and I could talk about football all night," Cyril says with a chuckle.

I force a smile. "No need to apologize. Rafael is our in-house sports expert. He must have mentioned he played at Loyola," I say, not missing the surprise in Rafael's eyes. Keep your potential clients close and your enemies closer.

"I might have mentioned it once or twice," Rafael says, his gaze lingering on me—knowing exactly how many times he's talked about Loyola and what it's meant to him, to his family. I look away.

Cyril twists the stem of his wineglass. "But knowing you, Evie, you've probably got a list of things to discuss so we can get to the numbers you mentioned in your email."

I laugh, breezy and brittle, as his implication hits me in the solar plexus. But checklist item #1 is at the top of the menu, and I need to do what I came here to do: close the deal.

Dead Set on You

Shooting one last *Behave or else* look toward my nemesis, I set my palms on the table, take a deep breath, and start the last pitch.

As I run through it—between sips of wine and nibbles of appetizers—Rafael chimes in, without interrupting or attempting to steal the show. In fact, each time he offers input, he looks to me to confirm it, and I have to mask my surprise the first time it happens. The second time, I'm prepared, and it's like passing a baton in a relay, one he made no time to rehearse for despite my repeated attempts to role-play the dinner. Even so, the conversation runs smoothly. We navigate through some of Cyril's tougher questions, steer around budget-focused topics, and race through to the end of our pitch.

While I don't trust a moment of Rafael's performance, I nearly squeal in relief. A grin slips out instead—and Rafael sees it. Winks at me. Makes my pulse spike.

I immediately sober, take another sip of wine, and turn to Cyril, eager for his response.

"Nothing less than I expected," Cyril says, his features inscrutable as he leans back, relaxing.

I realize I'm barely breathing as I wait for him to say more, to tell us if Media Lab won his business, if I'm one step closer to getting the promotion.

Brow furrowing, Cyril turns his attention to Rafael, like he's about to fire off a volley of questions.

Am I bothered he trusts Rafael to have the answers? A little bit. Am I fine with Rafael answering if it means getting the business? Yes, I have to be.

Cyril's frown deepens. "You know, it's been months of hearing about that tequila, Raf, and I've never had it. I think it's about time."

I blink, unsure if I've heard him correctly. *Tequila?* Now I'm the one frowning as I drag my shocked gaze from Cyril to Rafael, who shrugs nonchalantly.

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“I doubt they have it here, but they have good options,” Rafael says, summoning the server with a wave and ignoring me completely.

“Rafael.” I almost grind my teeth into a powder saying his name.

“Evie.” There’s a dare in his tone, and it makes me resent Cyril’s presence, because it’s the only thing keeping my mouth shut.

I watch in disbelief as Rafael orders tequila shots as if the last hour and a half never happened. As if he’s not about to shatter the last thread holding my nerves together—and our boss’s very explicit two-drink rule.

By the time tequila arrives and Cyril slides a glass in front of me, I’m doing breathing acrobatics to “Mamma Mia” as I stare down at the golden liquid, feeling uneasy, nauseous, and on the verge of a first-degree felony.

Of course this was his plan all along. Wait for me to let my guard down, then take one reckless, salt-rimmed swing at the entire evening. Because he knows this about me. He knows exactly what tequila does to my system, my pulse, my control. Knows it short-circuits my focus—and that I’ll spiral before I ever take a sip.

“Evie doesn’t drink tequila,” Rafael says, and my head snaps toward him. I don’t know if it’s another trick or his version of *Keep your enemies close—and memorize their weaknesses.*

“It’s not my favorite,” I say tightly, glaring at my nemesis.

Cyril chuckles. “Oh, non, Evie. Life is simply too short for you not to enjoy it a little.” *Winning his business is what’s going to help me enjoy life a little.*

Rafael holds my gaze, the dare ever present. His plan clear as day.

I bet he thinks I’ll bail, so he can be the “fun” one who charms the client, wins the account, and takes the victory to Media Lab.

Dead Set on You

Beside him, Cyril watches me with curious amusement. Their energy presses an internal button I can't deactivate. I wrap my hand around the shot glass and down it in one gulp.

The liquor burns a path down my throat, and I fight a coughing fit as it settles low in my belly.

Cyril chuckles, but Rafael doesn't join. I flash Rafael a tight smile—the kind that says *Nice try*.

And it unravels from there.

Two shots in and a third on the table, I'm feeling warm, watery, and struggling to remember my checklist. There's something on it about keeping Rafael in check, but I'm barely keeping myself in check.

My fury spikes, even through the tequila haze. He's throwing me off my game, ignoring the plan, and I need to take control before Rafael sabotages the account and my promotion.

I clear my throat, squaring my shoulders.

Rafael catches my gaze and shakes his head. *Not yet*.

My returning glare tells him to shove it.

"Cyril—" I start.

"Maybe we get some dessert?" Rafael cuts in.

"Or maybe we—"

"Get another bottle?"

Cyril looks between the two of us, his lips parted. But then his phone buzzes.

"I have to get this," he says, his accent more pronounced. "Désolé."

"Go ahead," I say, biding my time as he stands and moves out of earshot. Then I pounce. "Are you insane?" I hiss, leaning across the table.

Rafael leans in too. "Insanity is relative, E."

I swallow a low growl, hating his light tone and the casual nickname.

“You’re going to screw this up.” Anger clips my words. I can’t even fathom the idea of Rafael ruining our chances now. All those months. All that work. All the plans I’ve put on hold.

Anxiety sweeps through me like a wave, and I check it immediately. “I get that rules have never been your thing, but we can’t lose the account,” I say—to him, to myself.

“It’s all going to work out,” he says with so much Vela-brand certainty, it makes my fingers curl into the tablecloth. Of *course* he thinks it’ll work out. For him.

I swallow past the burn in my throat. “Try taking this seriously for once,” I hiss. “Because we can’t lose this one. I worked too hard.”

I aim for stern, but the tequila ruins it. Too many of my emotions bleed through those few words, and it takes too long to mask them.

Rafael’s gaze softens—another one of his tactics—and when his fingers twitch, they brush mine, heat singing through me. “I wasn’t going to—”

I jerk my hand away.

“I don’t need excuses, Rafael. I need you to do what we came here to do,” I say hotly.

Before he can attempt to Vela his way through this, Cyril appears in my periphery. I push away from the table, breathing through my nose, ignoring Rafael’s phantom touch on my skin.

I rub my hand against my leg, keeping my focus on Cyril, who doesn’t take his seat.

“I apologize, but I have a family emergency. My car is already waiting,” he says.

As one, Rafael and I stand.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say, my stomach knotting.

“Merci, Evie,” Cyril says, buttoning his suit jacket. “Before I go, I want to share that you are very good as a team. I know it took many months of work to get to know OhLaLove and what we’re aiming to do, and your preparation and pitch were very

Dead Set on You

compelling.” The dip in his voice hints at an incoming *but*, the kind that sidetracks careers, and I have the insane urge to slap my hand over his mouth and keep him from speaking it into existence.

Instead, I curl my hand into a fist and do *not* look at Rafael. If I do, I will break.

“Which is why I look forward to seeing what’s next, working with Media Lab,” Cyril adds. I blink in shock. Cyril smiles. “I’ll have my team coordinate next steps in the morning, and we’ll see where this goes. Who doesn’t want to help people fall in love?”

Rafael chuckles. I suck in a surprised breath.

OhLaLove is mine. Ours.

Relief should crash over me, but all I feel is *not that*. Because Rafael did this his way. Not mine. Not the way we planned it from start to finish. And of course—*of course*—it worked.

Goodbyes are a blur.

By the time Cyril is gone and the bill is settled, my blood is boiling, my ire no longer containable.

Steps outside the restaurant, I spin on Rafael, finger wagging in his direction. “You couldn’t turn it off for *one* single night, could you? Couldn’t follow a plan?”

He flinches in surprise. “Evie, we won.” He says it like that’s supposed to fix everything—him bromancing it with Cyril and completely ignoring the carefully laid out plan I emailed him no less than ten times. Well, not completely. He followed it long enough to trick me.

“Oh, *we* won?” I repeat, voice pitching with barely restrained anger.

“Why are you upset?” He tilts his head, eyebrows pulling together.

Ohmygod—why am I upset?

I bark out a harsh laugh and look up at the sky, needing somewhere to direct my fury other than at his stupidly symmetrical face. The tequila makes me dizzy. “You think this was only about winning?”

“I mean . . . yeah?” His confusion deepens. “That’s our job.”

“To be Rafael Vela!” I throw my hands in the air. “Do you ever think about anyone but yourself? Do you ever follow through on plans—ones that are agreed upon? Or even attempt to keep your word?”

Rafael brows furrow. “Help me out here, E. We won. That was the goal. Sometimes plans are shit and you have to pivot.” He shakes his head. “Cyril didn’t want to discuss the account tonight. Didn’t you see that?”

“Oh, did you find that out on some secret golf outing? Or was it a weekend tennis match?” My chest heaves with the effort of keeping it together. “Typical Rafael.”

He rolls his shoulders, digging his hands into his pockets, and shakes his head. “No—there wasn’t some special outing. I was simply *listening* to him.”

“Like you *listened* to Art Betton?” I snap, hating the mere mention of the last account we collaborated on, nearly three years into my time at Media Lab. We’d planned then too. For almost a year, working side by side, until his knife slid gently into my back and he took the account from me. “God,” I breathe. “I don’t know why I even expected something different this time around.”

The truth slips out, unchecked, because I drank one too many drinks.

“This is nothing like—”

“It’s exactly like before. The same old Raffy Taffy, coming in with his sweet words and stupid smiles, expecting people to simply fall head over heels for you . . . because you’re *you*,” I say, gesturing at all of him. I sound unhinged, but I don’t care. “You hijacked the meeting—tequila and all. Winged it like you always do, and it worked because it *always* works out for you.” *Like it will with the promotion.* I don’t say this, but I know it in my core. Cyril will sing his praises to Media Lab. Rafael will get the promotion. And Evie? I’ll get to try harder next time.

“I—that’s not what I was doing.”

Dead Set on You

I huff out an angry laugh. “Nice try, bucko.” I close the distance between us, jabbing a finger into his chest. “You can’t fool me. I see right through you.” *Jab.* “And I know every. Single. One. Of. Your. Weaknesses.” A poke for each word.

Rafael has the nerve to lift a brow. “Is that right, E?”

“Every single one.” I drop my finger. “And I’m going to make sure Dana and the other vice presidents know them too before they make a decision for their new director.”

His expression shifts. “You’re assuming they haven’t?”

My heart lurches. “They haven’t,” I say with feigned confidence, swallowing past the lump in my throat. His eyes tell me something that makes my knees weak. That maybe—*somehow*—they made an early decision and the promotion is his.

I can’t catch my breath.

I retreat a step and then another. I can’t be around him a second longer.

“Actually, they—”

“Don’t.” I shake my head. One more step.

“But you don’t even know what I have to say.”

I make a strangled noise that’s part growl, part primal scream. “Have you thought that maybe I don’t give a damn about what you have to say?”

A look some would call hurt flashes in his eyes. Another ridiculous trick.

I can’t look at him another second.

I turn sharply and walk away.

It’s late and humid. My hair’s sticking to the back of my neck, and my heart’s pummeling my rib cage. I dig my phone out from my purse to call an Uber because I want to be far from Rafael.

“Evie!” Rafael calls, his voice following me when he should be going to his apartment—the one in the *other* direction.

“Leave me alone!” I increase my pace, balancing on Jimmy Choo heels.

Lexi Alexander

“Can you stop for a second? I need to tell you something!”
As if I’d give him the pleasure of telling me he’s won.

I flip him off, something I’ve never done before. It’s oh-so-liberating it makes me smile.

Whatever else he’s saying is swept up in the cacophony of cars and the city—and doesn’t matter. Because I’m going to make Cyril my new BFF and get that promotion, even if it means learning French and watching every soccer game in the history of soccer (football).

Rafael shouts my name, but I only increase my pace to get away from him. He doesn’t get a chance to fool me again. Never again.

A car horn blares. Someone shouts a warning.

I look up. A bright light blinds me . . . and it goes dark.