

FRANKIE ALEXANDER

VERSIONS
of US



CHAPTER 1

Sienna

The billboard stops me in mid-stride. Forty feet of glossy triumph looms above the street—my campaign, my award. And the same unease that settles through me, steady and familiar.

Around me, the city hums and roars. The elevated walkways snake overhead, casting shadows onto the tide of people below. The road snarls with motion next to me—double-decker buses lurch forward, taxis blast their horns, a tram clatters past and dings to a halt. The air clings to my skin, thick with the ghost of summer, laced with exhaust fumes, the salt of the harbour, and the sweet oil of egg waffles from a street stall.

I lower myself onto a bench, my eyes moving from the billboard to the skyscrapers around it, catching the glare of the morning sun.

It's been ten years since I've been in Hong Kong, and the rhythm of the city hasn't changed: vibrant chaos, barely contained.

I'd like to think I've changed. That I've learned from what happened back then.

But knowing him, he hasn't. Which means this week will be either my shot at redemption or the biggest mistake of my career.

A runner slows to a stop in front of me, hands on her head, face towards the sky. She draws in two deep breaths, her ribs expanding beneath smooth, sun-bronzed skin. The matrix of muscle shifts in her shoulders and back, her skin glows with heat. There's something hypnotic about the way her body moves, something sculpted and precise yet undeniably raw. Strength layered with fragility; power wrapped in femininity.

I will her to turn around so I can see her face. I want her to tell me why she's more mesmerising than my own billboard.

She turns towards me, and I look away. Too quickly. Stupid.

I busy myself with my phone, half relieved when she ambles over to the bench, dropping onto the other end with zero grace. She leans forward, elbows resting on her knees, hands pressed to her forehead. Her sunglasses shield her expression, but the slow rise and fall of her breath gives something away.

The tattoo catches my eye before I can stop myself. It curves along her ribs, half hidden beneath the band of her sports bra—thin, elegant lettering inked into golden skin. A quote of some kind. A poem, maybe. I usually find those kinds of tattoos tacky, but there's something exquisite about this one.

"Are you okay?" I hear myself ask, surprising us both.

She nods, voice rough. "Exorcising the weekend demons."

The woman sits up and takes a deep breath, as if returning herself to the world from wherever her mind has just been. She takes off her sunglasses and looks up at the sun, squinting, and then sideways at me—properly for the first time.

A shudder of recognition runs through me.

It's Charlie fucking Blake.

Of all the people in Hong Kong. On a damn bench.

I almost get up. The tension in my body locks tight, a mix of frustration and, if I'm honest, embarrassment. I've just spent the last minute admiring her physique and her damn tattoo, and wondering about her weekend demons.

Deep breath.

She looks at me with those translucent blue eyes, those even lips, the freckles scattered across sun-warmed skin. Still flushed from her run, she's as striking as the photos suggested, more so because here she's real.

I wait for the awkwardness of her realising who I am and why I've come to Hong Kong. Her boss for the week, and her final chance to do something worthwhile before I inevitably fire her, like I have done to many before her. But she stares back at me blankly, and I realise she has no idea who I am.

The sting is sharp and unexpected. I blink, straighten, fold the heat in my chest into something cleaner, harder. The campaign I've just delivered is the only award-winning work this agency has produced in two years. I might not have been the creative lead, but my name was in every article, internal and external. She clearly hasn't read a single one. Addie McGregor called her a gifted brat. I didn't argue then, and I won't now.

Charlie looks across the road at the billboard. I resist the urge to leave because I suddenly see the opportunity here. To explore her mind before the pretence of roles and responsibilities is introduced.

Just a stranger on a bench.

It's almost too perfect.

A chance to learn who the real Charlie Blake is before she realises who I am.

"Good run?" I ask, cringing at the inane question.

She shrugs, stretching out her legs, her body still humming with exertion. "Too many buildings and people, not as good as the mountains." Her voice is unexpectedly crisp, with a refined British accent not far from my own.

I've read that she lives on Lantau Island, a thirty-minute ferry from the city. Mountains and beaches as far as the eye can see. It doesn't quite fit with my party-girl image of her, but maybe mountains make for better Instagram posts.

"You don't live in the city?"

She shakes her head, smiling. She looks younger than I thought, and I can't remember her exact age. Thirty-two or three. Seven or eight years younger than me and infinitely more immature. Her cheeks are still flushed from her run and glistening with sweat. I thought from the rumours of rehab that she might be quite sickly, but she's apparently the complete opposite.

"Lantau Island," she says wistfully, "with the wild people and wilder buffalo."

The flicker of a memory moves through me. Camping on the beach as kids. The salt-thick air. The stars so bright that they felt close enough to touch. I remember Lantau Island like it belongs to another life.

I swallow it down. "Just in the city on weekends, then?"

She tilts her head, brows furrowing slightly before realisation dawns. "Oh, the weekend demons? No, not related to the city. My dog and I drank far too much red wine last night. I blame Atlas, of course, but he swears it's my fault, as usual. That's dogs for you."

I blink. Not the answer I expected.

"You drank wine with your dog?"

She stretches, arms overhead, the movement causing the muscles in her abdomen to ripple beneath her skin. "Well, I drank the wine. He judged me for it. Same thing."

I almost laugh. Almost.

"Atlas is a nice name."

She nods. "He has about ten different variants, none of which he responds to anyway."

"Variants?" I ask because I can't help myself. Because it reminds me of Tom.

She leans back on the bench, a slow, deliberate smirk creeping onto her lips. "Atty, Atty-Mc-At-Face, Atlas the Asshole, Atlas the Great, Atty McFatty, Atty Batty, Atty Watty...you see where I'm going with this?"

I chuckle before I can stop myself. "I do see."

She eyes me playfully. "I have an entire playlist of songs I've made up about him, too."

I raise an eyebrow. "Songs?"

She nods solemnly. "Yeah. Classics like 'Please Don't Sleep on My Feet' and 'Your Breath Stinks, But You're the Love of My Life.'"

The words should be ridiculous. But the way she says them—the matter-of-fact ease, the quiet amusement in her expression—makes them unexpectedly...endearing.

"All originals, I might add."

She has such a surprising openness. It almost makes me feel cold that we're sitting here like this. Strangers but not strangers. And in just over an hour, we'll be the complete opposite.

"They sound like masterpieces," I say, voice clipped.

She bites on her bottom lip, thinking, smiling. *Flirting?* "It's a good job I'm tone-deaf, otherwise I'd try and sing you one."

"Maybe another time." The words leave my mouth before I even realise what I'm saying.

Fuck.

She gives me a side glance, curious, uncertain. I find myself locked into her intense eyes, the graceful cheekbones, the expressive lips. Not what I expected at all.

"You live here or visiting?"

I hesitate. *Good question. Complex answer.* I press my lips together as a strange longing pulls at me. I can't deny it's good to be back in Hong Kong, but it's agony too.

"Visiting. For a week." A half-truth.

"Nice. A week is a good amount of time." She nods, and then her gaze drifts across the street to my billboard. "Although there are better views than this to admire."

Here we go.

I follow her eyes to examine the billboard, pretending not to know anything about it. A pang of guilt slices through me, but I ignore it because business is business.

"You don't like it?"

She shakes her head and considers her words carefully, which isn't something I was expecting from her. "The campaign was about overcoming adversity."

I study the canvas, my throat dry. "Sounds worthy to me."

She shakes her head, still squinting at it. "It assumes that overcoming adversity is enough, like the world doesn't just kill you impartially anyway."

I turn to her, surprised to hear Hemingway from her mouth. "You're quoting Hemingway at 8 a.m. on a Monday."

She smiles at me, and I realise she's surprised that I know it's Hemingway. *Does she really not know who I am?*

"It's never too late or early for Hemingway, in my opinion."

I almost nod, agreeing, but I remind myself why I'm here and what I need to do. *Focus, Sienna. Get what you need.*

"You think people want to hear about the impartiality of how we die? From an advert, I mean."

"What people want and what people need are two very different things," she says and pins me with those sharp eyes, which are sad and alive at the same time. "The campaign was too safe, in my opinion. They probably just gave in to whatever the client wanted."

A kaleidoscope of feelings tangles in my chest, and I have to remind myself that she doesn't know what went into this campaign. The sleepless nights, the cold sweats. How it became about overcoming my own adversity. And even with all of that, even with everything I gave it, the campaign fell short of what it could have been. Because budgets are more important, and awards are all people care about.

I don't have any words to give her; they're all trapped in my throat. So I'm grateful when she speaks first.

"Also, the colours suck, and the graphics look like someone gave a bunch of crayons to an anxious rhino."

"An anxious rhino," I repeat, staring at the billboard. I fought for those graphics, and I know they weren't good enough. Still, it hurts to hear it from her mouth.

She gets up, stretching her limbs. "Anyway, sorry to interrupt your morning and your view."

"Off to conquer the day?" I ask lightly, squinting in the sun.

Charlie turns to face me as she walks away, an easy smile on her face. "You know, there are some cool bars on Peel Street, if you fancy a drink later," she says, like it's nothing. "I can't promise karaoke, but you never know where the night might end up."

I nod, but any words catch somewhere behind my teeth, and then she jogs off like none of it matters, as if people like me don't matter. The arrogance is staggering. After she disappears into the crowd, I glance back at the billboard.

She insults my campaign, dismisses the work I bled for, and then has the audacity to ask me for a drink, like we're just two strangers in the street, like she does this all the time. And the worst part—the part that really gets under my skin—is that for a second, I almost say yes.

CHAPTER 2

Charlie

Even after a cold shower, I'm sweating my tits off in the office. My skin's hot from the run, a bead of sweat sliding between my shoulder blades. Amy was right to drag me out, even if it meant catching a 6:20 a.m. ferry to the city. The kind of early start that's going to sucker punch me at exactly 2 p.m. this afternoon.

Worth it, though. For the shameless gossip. For the city waking up around us. And, mostly, for that brief, electric exchange with the stranger on the bench. I don't usually have the guts to ask someone out. But how could I not? People like that don't cross your path twice.

Graham stands in the middle of the agency's massive common area, eyeing each of us like a cartoon villain. Mr Burns in human form. The space is all red-and-white walls plastered with advertising posters and David Ogilvy quotes, plus a pool table missing at least three balls. There are ten of us standing, which means this is the TrueSelf pitch team. I've made it this far.

Maybe Matteo's right; maybe I'm finally being given a chance to lead a damn campaign. I turn to look at him, shoulder to shoulder next to me in his white shirt and skinny tie. Peggy Wong walks past me with two team members, and I hold out my hand for a fist bump, which makes her giggle. I glance at Sarah Longhorn across the room and gesture that I like her outfit, a giant pastel-green overcoat. She pulls a pose for me, half embarrassed, and then looks back at her team. These are a collection of my favourite people from the agency, so there's hope.

Graham's kept us here waiting longer than necessary, which is all part of building the excitement, but it's making me late. And anxious. This

meeting was supposed to start at 9:30 a.m., but it's almost 10 a.m., and I have a doctor's appointment in ten fucking minutes.

I rock from one foot to the other and glance down at the TrueSelf smartwatch they slapped on my wrist this morning—sleek, overpriced, and about as stylish as an ankle monitor. All it's done so far is confirm that, yes, my heart rate is elevated (shocker), and, yes, I'm about to be late for my doctor's appointment if I don't move now. Really cutting-edge stuff.

"You've probably heard," Graham begins, raising his wrist to show everyone he's wearing the watch, "we've been invited to pitch for a new client, TCI, to help them launch their new TrueSelf watch, which is about to revolutionise the health-and-wellness industry." He opens his arms wide, encompassing us in some kind of distant hug, his expression beatific. "I'm delighted to announce that you are the team who'll be working on it. This is the cream of the cream, the very best for the job. Each of you is an expert in your respective field, chosen for your experience and passion."

An excited murmur spreads through the room, followed by a silent anticipation. Matteo nudges me with his shoulder, his face beaming, floppy fringe curling over his forehead.

"It's your moment, Charlie," he whispers with a crisp Italian accent. "You're going to lead the team."

I want to believe him. But my pulse is pounding and my skin is clammy. I want to yell at Graham to hurry up, to stop dragging this out and just say the words. Say my name. Name me as head of the team, give me the chance they promised a year ago, before I slide into irrelevance. I want the promotion. I want the recognition. And, honestly, I just want him to finish so I'm not late for my doctor's appointment.

"The team will be led by someone who has abracadabra-ed awards out of thin air," Graham says with a glint in his eye, waving his hand like he's holding a wand.

A flush runs up my neck, and I cover it with my hand. I'm not sure if they can still say that about me, but I'll take it.

"Who's coming to us off the back of yet another creative endeavour that's been celebrated worldwide."

Wait, what?

He clears his throat and straightens his shoulders, taking a breath to add volume to his voice. "It gives me great pleasure to welcome Sienna Margot from our London HQ to lead this pitch."

A million daggers prick my skin. Who the fuck is Sienna Margot? I should probably know the name. She must be one of the executives sent across from Elleron's London office, ready to commercialise the shit out of creativity.

Sienna Margot steps into the room, and I instantly want to be anywhere else in the world. It's the woman from the fucking bench this morning.



I press my thumbs together in a silent gesture to myself: *Keep going*, but the anger is a pool of molten lava in my chest. Sienna Margot is the beautiful, graceful, intelligent woman who knew Hemingway. Big brown eyes, smooth cream skin and wavy neck-length blonde hair. Clean lines and all “fuck you” attitude.

The woman who tricked me into insulting her own fucking campaign, who took my job as team lead. Who I invited to drinks on Peel Street tonight (*oh my God*).

Fuck, I said her award-winning campaign was drawn by an anxious rhino.

She scans the crowd, and her eyes meet mine with a coolness that reminds me of how she looked at me this morning. She must have recognised who I was just after she'd finished staring at the rest of me. She set me up, for fuck's sake. Who the hell does that? A twat from head office, that's who.

“What? But I thought you were going to lead it—” Matteo is as shocked as I am, and I want him to disappear.

I want the hope to disappear. I want to leave this room as quickly as possible. I look at my TrueSelf watch. Eight minutes until my appointment. They'll give it to someone else if I'm not there, and I'll be stuck with heart palpitations for however long it takes me to make another appointment. Weeks, probably.

“It doesn't matter, just leave it,” I say hastily.

The room quiets as Sienna steps into the space. She pauses for a long moment because she's probably read somewhere in a textbook that that's what she should do.

“Thanks, Graham,” she purrs. She stands beside him, posture-perfect, like a robot. Not a hair out of place, not a crease in her clothes. Wearing the starched white shirt from this morning with tailored black jeans and brown leather boots, she's striking and poised.

I hate her.

"I haven't worked with any of you before, but we're about to get to know each other incredibly well. You'll be working non-stop on this pitch for the next seven days. You'll be wearing the TrueSelf watch every minute of the day. You will live and breathe that watch." She takes a breath, lips curling. "If you're not up to it, now's the time to say so. I won't stand for excuses or half-assed work, and I sure as hell won't stand for shit creative."

She looks at me, and my cheeks burn. So does my rage.

"You're mine now," she says in a deep tone that's meant to be threatening, but there's something so seductive about it that I have to look away (*thank you, hormones*).

"I'll kick off with the leadership team at 11 a.m.: Matteo, Charlie, Peggy, Felix, and Sarah. Matteo and I will work on strategy; the creative team will build concepts. Charlie leads creative tomorrow, Felix on data. On Thursday, Matteo, Charlie, and I pitch in Bangkok, then refine before Sunday's final decision."

Peggy turns and whispers to the two Cantonese members of her team. Sienna watches them for a moment, takes a breath, and then starts talking in fluent Cantonese. The room is silent, watching her in awe because she's just as confident and composed in a different language. She commands the room in a way I've never seen before, and it just makes me hate her more.

When she finishes, the team bleats like fucking sheep and disperses into animated chatter that fills the room.

I look at my watch: five minutes. I can still make it if I run.

"I've got to go," I say abruptly, ending whatever Matteo is saying to me. "I've got an appointment. Cover for me if I'm late for the briefing, okay?"

"Are you alright?"

"Yes," I say, turning on my feet.

I try to walk as fast as I can to the door without drawing attention to myself. Sienna's talking to Graham, but she glances sideways at me as I pass her.

"Charlie," Graham calls with his smarmy voice.

I stop and pivot on my feet but make no effort to join them.

"Come and meet your boss for the week. I think you'll learn a lot from Sienna." He beckons me over, and I have no choice but to comply.

I take a few steps, as much as I'm willing to offer her.

We stand paces apart from each other as Graham continues. "You'll lead creative on this under Sienna's watchful eye, so it's your chance to shine. Maybe get back to some of your former glory."

Go fuck yourself.

Sienna straightens her shoulders, and I look down at my feet, trying not to choke on the emotion crawling up my throat.

He looks between us. "Two award-winning ladies on the same team! It's in the bag."

Graham is thankfully called away by someone else before I'm forced to pretend to be nice to Sienna. He leaves us standing there, a thickness between us that's cold and suffocating.

"You knew who I was." It comes out as more of an accusation than I intended. "You tricked me into talking about your campaign."

She doesn't react to my words, simply looks at me, trying to see through me. *Good luck*, I want to say, because there's nothing there.

"The bigger issue is that you didn't know who I was."

"Get over yourself," I sigh and look away dismissively.

She takes a step towards me until there are only inches between us, probably less. The smell of citrus and spices washes over me because of course she smells good. Her closeness prickles at my skin, both smothering and invigorating.

"You weren't my pick for the creative lead," she says, cool and measured, "but I'm assured that there is still some brilliance in there. I suggest you find it quickly."

"Ah, looking for my brilliance." I scrunch my nose up at her. "Is that what you were doing this morning?"

Her eye twitches. "I'm assuming you want a promotion to ECD as part of this project?"

I flinch; I can't help it, and she smiles and leans in closer, almost unbearably close. The air between us feels static, makes me want to step away, but I can't. I won't.

"That means you have to go through me," she says coolly. "And that means you have to earn it, not just rest on your laurels. So get on board, or get off this train. I don't care either way; just decide quickly."

A train metaphor. Toot-fucking-toot. Such bullshit.

Something occurs to me. I straighten my shoulders and throw her what I hope is a haughty look. "I don't think that's true at all. If you didn't pick

me, it means the client did. And as we all know from your last campaign, the client always gets what they want.”

That makes me David against Goliath, and I’m going to start throwing stones, or whatever the hell he threw.

If she feels anything about what I’ve just said to her, she doesn’t show it. A well-trained robot through and through.

“I know how to deal with people like you, Charlie Blake. I’ve been thinking about this moment for a long time.”

People like me. She has no idea who I am, what I’ve been through, how the last year of my life has left scars across my body, mind, and soul, how my heart trembles for no reason, and I wake up in cold sweats, and how everything feels like nothing.

“That’s great, Sienna, because we both know from this morning, I haven’t given you a single thought.” I take a short breath, which catches in my chest—almost painful, almost choking with anger. “And I doubt that will change.”

And with that stroke of impressive self-sabotage, I turn and leave the room.

CHAPTER 3

Charlie

The doctor makes me wait for forty-five minutes because he's a complete asshole. I've flicked through all the dated magazines on the table, which I'm sure are full of bacteria and God knows what else. Time doesn't exist in this room, just slow-motion movements and noises. The hum of conversations, the swish of scrubs as doctors walk past, the shrill bleat of telephones at reception. Muffled and distant, a symphony of awfulness. Beige leather seats, grey linoleum floor, white walls. The colours of tedium and death.

I look again at the clock, tapping my foot on the floor. I'm going to be late for everything today. That's just how this day is going to unfold. I wish I'd stayed in bed with Atlas. The more time I spend with people, the more I realise how much I prefer dogs.

I glance down at my phone, which opens on a half-hearted Google search for Sienna Margot. I tried to find something interesting about her but got bored of the business spiel in every interview. Buzzword after buzzword about ambition and creativity, but I understand now why she was so surprised that I don't know who she is. She oversaw the team that won a massive award six months ago. They call her "the fixer", like that's anything to be proud of when it's so much fucking easier to edit than to create. A behind-the-scenes maniac who gets shit done at any cost.

I also didn't realise she was born in Hong Kong, which explains why she speaks Cantonese. The articles glaze over details about Sienna's personal life, which I assume is intentional, except to say that she's single and childless. Good fucking on her, because the pressure to be otherwise must be intense. Though it could mean she's just a cold-hearted bitch no one can stand. She did trick me into a conversation this morning.

Interestingly, she was considered a talented creative director ten years ago but abruptly left Hong Kong for a different role in the UK. A non-creative role. It doesn't say why, but I sense more beneath the surface. A juicy, sordid story, I hope.

My TrueSelf watch vibrates, and I flip my wrist to look at the screen. What the hell is it now, Watch?

Your heart rate is elevated. Take a moment to breathe.

What? And then I feel it, the distinct shuddering of my heartbeat. The palpitations that come out of nowhere. So, Watch can predict them—interesting. This makes it immediately more useful than my actual doctor, which isn't saying much.

I inhale deeply through my nose, hold it in my lungs, and release it slowly. Some breathing technique that's supposed to be good for you (as if breathing isn't good enough for you anyway). The threadiness softens until the solid pounding is back.

Well done, Watch tells me. I languish in the praise for a moment, then frown at the insanity of a world where machines are our confidants. For fuck's sake.

I press the button on the side of Watch's face, staring at the data I uploaded when I put it on. I gave it the bare minimum to see if it's any good, guessing at some stuff and summarising others. It's none of Watch's business about the rest.

I flick through the screens, wading through data that sometimes gives me more anxiety than my anxiety itself. Because I hate data, and the more data there is, the less I understand it.

What would you like to know? It asks me suddenly, like a fucking mind-reader.

I find the app on my phone and start typing. Let's give Watch its first test. *How to make the palpitations stop.*

First, let's look at you and what's causing them.

It tells me the data for someone my age. Okay, that's easy enough. And then it tells me about someone with my condition and on my meds. It shows me the experiences of other people who've been through something

similar, which surprises me because I didn't think that many people would have been through something like that. It shows me that they feel the same anger and lack of control.

Jesus.

I see you're at the doctor's right now, and he's running late for your appointment, which is probably why your heart rate is elevated. I know it's stressful, but you can focus on your breathing. We could do some mindfulness while you wait.

I look at it for a long moment but press No.

Okay. Can I ask you a personal question? If you consent to share some of your medical records, I can give you more tailored advice. Your data will stay encrypted and stored locally. When used for research, it's fully anonymised—never traceable to you. This helps improve treatment and supports others with similar conditions. You can withdraw consent at any time. Would you like to learn more about how your data is protected?

Consent. Data. Privacy. All the things that all the companies are so desperate to get hold of. And here I am considering giving it to a watch, which will send it into some internet ether for it to be accessible to everyone and anyone. I've spent the last year hiding what happened, and now I'm going to give it to a watch. Not a chance.

I type quickly: No

Okay. We can explore it later. In the meantime, based on the data you've already input, here are a few questions you might want to ask your doctor during your appointment.

It briefly summarises my condition again and then lists questions I've never thought about. Nuanced, tailored. Brilliant. Hope swells inside my chest. Someone is finally on my side, even if it is a piece of technology. An anchor in an otherwise raging hurricane.

"Blake, Charlie," a voice calls at last.

I get to my feet, stretching tight muscles, and my body floods with dread as I step into his room.

"Charlie, how are you?" he asks without looking up, beckoning me to the chair beside his desk. He's writing something on a file that I assume is mine. I hate this room with its posters about muscles and bones and its books about medicine. Generic information that can't solve any of my problems. And the tiny window at the end of the room only makes me want to jump out of it.

"The heart palpitations are back," I snap angrily. "I was running this morning, and I had to stop because they were bad."

He looks at me from behind his black spectacles, nods, and then types something into his computer. I reel off two of the questions the watch told me to ask, and he looks at me suspiciously.

"Why are you asking about that?"

"Because it's my right to ask."

"Do you want more blood tests?"

"Yes." I look down at Watch, which gives me a list of tests to ask for, and I read them aloud to him. Some I've had before, and some I've never heard of.

He looks at me for a long time and then turns to his computer. "Okay, we can do that. It will give us a bit more insight into the palpitations."

Why the fuck didn't you order these tests when I first mentioned the palpitations, I want to ask him. Why the fuck are you so shit at this? But it's no use. I've lost my temper with him multiple times, and it only makes things worse. And I could do with this day not getting any worse. At least Watch appears to be on my side.

"Anything else?"

I take a breath, mind and heart racing. "Can you send my medical records for the last year? All the tests and all the results? Right from the beginning of...what happened."

He doesn't look up. "What for?"

I make a face at him, like I need a reason to want my own data.

"I just want them. It's my data."

He shakes his head. "Ms Blake, we can't just hand you your medical records."

"Why not?"

He sighs, clearly exasperated. "You can submit a request through the admin office. We'll process it within forty days."

Forty days. A fucking biblical amount of time.

I stare at him, pulse rising. "Why the hell does it take so long?"

He pauses, fingers hovering over the keyboard. "That's the process."

My heart races, pulse flickers. "I don't care about the fucking process."

Finally, he looks at me. "Ms Blake, I can't make exceptions for you..."

I let his words wash over me, open my phone, and type into the TrueSelf app: *How do I get access to my medical records in Hong Kong? Not protocol.*

It lights up instantly: *Officially? You submit a written request and wait up to 40 days. Unofficially? You ask the doctor directly. Many will provide a copy on the spot. Tip: You're legally entitled to the data. If he resists, ask why he's delaying access to your personal information.*

"Are you listening to me?" He looks annoyed and shifts in his chair. "That's not how this usually works."

"Why are you delaying? It's my personal information."

He shakes his head like a disappointed teacher. "Submit a request, and I'll see what I can do."

You can go to hell.

I get to my feet. He hands me a few sheets of paper and ushers me out of the room towards the nurses' station, where I return to the beige leather seats in the timeless vacuum of a waiting area with new diseased magazines to read.

Watch buzzes again to ask me what the doctor said and whether I need a hand drafting an email requesting my medical files. It asks again about giving me its data. Not so fast, Watch. Or at least, not until I've had a chance to see what else you can do.

CHAPTER 4

Sienna

It's 11:10 a.m., and Charlie Blake is nowhere to be seen. The level of arrogance is so astounding that I can't quite believe it. I'll admit I was intrigued for the first few minutes after our encounter. The way she spoke about Hemingway this morning, and then with such anger when we were properly introduced. The completely unfiltered emotion that sits so close to the surface is almost visible. It wasn't what I expected.

But now that it's clear she's a self-indulgent child, I just want to fire her. Trying to manage her attitude is a waste of my energy. I knew she'd test my limits and that I'd have to step in and do something about it, but I was hoping for more time.

I pace slowly at the front of the boardroom, or "war room", as it'll be referred to for the rest of the week. My favourite kind of room, ready for battle. A wall of windows to my left overlooks Victoria Harbour, the water cut with the wakes of ferries and the steady drift of container ships waiting offshore. Across the harbour, the skyline rises in layers—steel and glass climbing into the haze. Every other wall is covered with pristine whiteboards, ready for creative brilliance. Ready for the creative director who hasn't even bothered to show up.

The leadership team stare back at me, sitting around the massive table that stretches the room's length. Despite how I feel, I can't fire Charlie Blake. The team's loyalties aren't with me yet. It would only make me look like the asshole, not her.

I swallow the fire, cooling it for when I know I'll need it. The moment will come, and I'll be ready.

"I've sent you all the plan for the week ahead." I point to the whiteboard behind me, which has an eyewatering schedule. "Every single day has

a milestone, right up to the outcome announcement on Sunday.” I meet everyone’s eyes, commanding their undivided attention. “Monday to Wednesday is about us getting the pitch right between us. Our presentation to the client on Thursday kicks off the cocreation process with them, after which we can expect multiple rounds of feedback before the outcome on Sunday.”

I look at Matteo, sitting at the front of the table. The handsome Italian strategy director appears to be laid back and supremely confident. At least he should be easy to work with, though we’ll see if he’s more than just charm and a pretty face. And then there’s Peggy Wong, the straight-talking senior copywriter whose genius I’ve seen in other campaigns, and Felix Chow, the 20-something data analytics wizard who’s already wearing two of the TrueSelf watches and analysing his data in real-time. There’s Sarah Longhorn, a middle-aged eccentric art director with oversized spectacles. And, of course, my absent creative director, Charlie fucking Blake.

A motley crew of personalities stare back at me, expressions burning with hunger. Not just for the win but for the chance to be part of something bigger than themselves.

What they don’t realise is just how big it really is. This pitch could make or break the Hong Kong business. It could decide their futures—their jobs, their lives as they know them. The stakes couldn’t be higher, but they don’t need to carry that weight. Not yet. Their job is to unleash the kind of creative brilliance that wins pitches. My job is to clear the path so they can do it.

The pressure, the high wire act, the razor-thin line between triumph and catastrophe. This is what fuels me.

But something is holding them back—a charge of anticipation hums in the air, a tension waiting to break. Matteo keeps glancing at his watch. Sarah peeks over her spectacles, eyes flicking toward the door as if willing it to open. They’re waiting. For *her*.

The door swings open, and Charlie steps inside, her expression unreadable. Finally! She’s paler than she was an hour ago. Probably the weekend hangover catching up with her. Maybe that story about sipping red wine with her dog was just that—a story—and she’s spent the last hour locked in an ongoing battle with last night’s tequila.

As she crosses the room, I’m struck again by the contrast. The different versions. This morning, perched on that bench in her running gear, she was

raw, untamed, radiating a kind of effortless power. Now, wrapped in a sleek black shift dress that highlights the defined lines of her shoulders and the tone in her arms, she's something else entirely. Poised. Elegant.

She looks at me without apologising and sits next to Matteo. I remind myself to keep cool. I don't need the drama of having to find another creative director on day one. Especially one who the client personally requested.

"Nice of you to join us, Charlie."

She holds up her wrist, flashing the TrueSelf watch at me. "Got the time wrong."

Matteo's eyes practically shine with admiration, for God's sake. Peggy beams at her, and Sarah pushes her glasses up her nose before looking at me, waiting. But something shifts. The air thickens, humming with a charge I can't ignore. It's the kind of energy that, once unleashed, can be harnessed into something extraordinary.

They've been waiting for her. Not just for the meeting to start but for her. That much is obvious. They trust her. For some reason, respect her.

And I need to know why.

I clasp my hands together, standing in front of them. "First. A customary icebreaker to help me get to know you. I want you to tell me something no one knows about you. And before you roll your eyes at me, this isn't about what you say. I want originality, and I want bravery. Don't give me any generic bullshit."

They look at each other. Charlie sits with her arms folded over her chest, defiant, like when we were talking to Graham. There's no filter there. What you see is what she's thinking. It's not unusual for a creative, but her lack of control is dangerous.

"Matteo, you're up."

He looks at me with an easy smile and then at each person in the room, buying himself some time, and then clears his throat. "I once met the Queen of England at an event in London. She was very old, very English."

Oh, come on. At least try.

"Great. Peggy?"

She looks around the room nervously. "Um, I've written three steamy romance books under a different name."

The others call back to her, Matteo whooping with excitement. Sarah looks completely embarrassed by the revelation, which also gives me an insight into who she is, which is the idea behind this bloody exercise.

I give her a genuine smile because that's a great answer. "Perhaps you can bring us a copy for the plane journey on Wednesday," she tells her. "Felix?"

Felix and Sarah both give fairly generic answers, which is as predictable as it is uninspiring. They're still getting to know me, still holding their cards to their chest. It's my job to get them to release their cards. And I'm beginning to think Charlie is the key.

"Charlie, would you care to join this exercise?"

She sits up in her chair, taking a deep breath. "Of course, Sienna. I love icebreakers. They're so contemporary." She rubs her hands together, and the others wait for her to speak. She leans forward, pursing her lips, adding to their anticipation and to mine.

"Sometimes," Charlie begins, her voice slow and deliberate, "when I'm sitting on the toilet, I take a tampon out of the box"—she mimics the action with a measured precision, holding an invisible object between her fingers—"and I put it in my mouth, pretending I'm smoking a cigar."

She brings her hand to her lips, leans her head back slightly, and exhales an imaginary plume of smoke. The room holds its breath. The image she's painted is so absurd, so unexpected, it lodges itself in my mind before I can stop it.

Silence stretches. Matteo raises his eyebrows, while Felix glances between us, clearly unsure if this is some kind of test. Peggy bows her head, shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

I almost want to join them. Almost. But I hold it back. Giving in would mean handing her too much power.

"That's an image to behold," I say coolly.

Charlie nods, perfectly deadpan. "Thank you. It's usually a Super Plus. The bigger, the better. You know? Like the real thing."

I want to ignore the pull of her humour, but she's succeeded in lodging that image in my mind now—Charlie on the toilet, puffing theatrically on a tampon cigar—and, somehow, it twists itself around my own memories. Late nights with Addie, cigars in hand, smoke curling in the air between us. My brain glitches, replacing the cigars with Charlie's ridiculous prop, and I'm dangerously close to laughing.

I push past it, locking onto her instead. I point at Charlie, then scan the room, meeting each of their eyes in turn. "I need that from all of you. Dig

deeper. Find the awful things. The human things that make us who we are. The things we don't want to share with anyone else."

Silence lingers for a beat too long. Then Charlie, head tilted, eyes bright with challenge, leans in just slightly.

"What about you?"

I nod. I have a hundred answers ready—neatly packaged, perfectly palatable. But Charlie isn't asking for something rehearsed. She wants something real. And I know exactly what to give her.

"I have a tattoo that's actually a map," I say, watching her for a reaction, "but I've never told anyone where it leads."

A flicker of surprise crosses Charlie's face. For the first time, she falters. It's subtle, but I see the way her lips part slightly, the almost imperceptible blush that rises to her cheeks. And just like that, the pendulum of power shifts.

She doesn't hold my gaze for long.

"Well, now you have to show us," Matteo cuts in, throwing his hands up. "We'll guess where it leads."

The others chime in, voices layering over each other with playful insistence, and I know I've won. I've unsettled them, made them see me differently. That's the plan.

I laugh, shaking my head. "Not for public consumption."

But I catch Charlie watching me again. And this time, she doesn't look away so quickly.

I take a breath. "Let's get on with this pitch. Matteo, can you give us an overview of the watch, please?"

He stands and pulls up the slide deck. "The TrueSelf Watch is designed to read you—literally. It tracks your heart rate, stress levels, sleep, movement, even skin temperature, then learns how those patterns connect to emotion and behaviour."

I nod, pretending to listen. But my attention keeps drifting sideways—to Charlie.

She's not watching Matteo. She's watching me.

Matteo flips to the next slide. "What makes it different isn't what it collects—it's what it gives back. The AI interprets your physiology to identify mood, triggers, and state of mind, offering feedback that helps you understand why you feel the way you do. It's not just a tracker; it's a mirror."

"Sounds invasive," Sarah mutters.

"It's intimate, not invasive," Matteo replies smoothly. "The user's in control."

Charlie leans forward slightly, her tone calm but cutting. "*Control's* a nice word. What does it actually mean?"

The question hangs there. Sharp, deliberate. Not really about the product. About me? Or something else?

Matteo hesitates for a fraction too long before switching slides. "Total agency. Data stays local to the device unless the user decides otherwise. Anything shared is encrypted and anonymised, no personal identifiers. Every access point is logged, time-stamped, and reversible. They've built what they call the world's first *integrated privacy vault*. TrueSelf doesn't monetise data, it monetises the product based on trust. It's the first model that treats people as the owners of their own digital selves."

"Privacy by design," I add. "Not by promise."

Charlie glances up, her mouth curving into something that isn't quite a smile. "Sure. Until someone decides it's worth more than ethics."

The room stills for half a beat. I meet her gaze, holding it this time. There's defiance there but something else too. Something I can't quite grasp the edges of. Fear. Anger? At what?

"It's our job to make them believe," I say finally, keeping my voice even. "So let's get to work."

I let that settle for a beat before shifting into action. "We need creativity that's as brave as the tech. Felix, work with Matteo to build detailed customer archetypes. Charlie, you'll bring them to life. The customer is the hero in this story. The data shapes the narrative, and that includes consent. We have to show not just what this watch does but why it can be trusted."

I scan the room, reading them. This is how we justify the budget we're asking for. If we don't nail this, the whole thing falls apart.

I signal to Matteo. "Keep going. Let's cover strategy and customer."

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