



Worthy of Love

Quinn Ivins



Chapter 1

“I SEE THAT YOU CHECKED the box.”

He didn't need to say which one. Nadine clenched her fingers under the table.

The franchise owner stuffed his face with French fries while he interviewed her at a plastic table in the dining area. “Now, it's not automatically disqualifying. I get a nice tax break for hiring felons. So if you're committed to turning your life around, I'll consider you like any other candidate. But I need you to tell me what you did.” He slurped his soda and peered at her.

Nadine glanced out at the arches towering over the parking lot. *Fucking hell.* Third in her class at Yale, a top corporate attorney, senior advisor to a presidential nominee—and now she wasn't good enough to flip burgers.

No point in stalling. “I coordinated illegal campaign contributions to a presidential candidate.”

The man's mouth fell open, revealing a half-chewed fry. “Wait. You're—”

“Yes. I'm *that* Nadine Bayani.”

Nadine steeled herself. Whatever his politics, the reaction would be bad. Republicans hated her because they viewed her as the mastermind of a corrupt—if ultimately unsuccessful—scheme to elect a liberal Democrat to the White House. Meanwhile, Democrats blamed her for the election scandal that led to their defeat.

The disgust in his beady glare suggested the Republican variety. “I didn't recognize you with short hair.”

That's the idea.

“I watched you testify on TV. You said Alyssa Jackson didn’t know anything about your little scheme. Is that true?”

She met his gaze. “That’s what I said.”

Red splotches appeared on his pockmarked cheeks. “That damn socialist almost became president because of you. We let you come to this country from—where was it, Vietnam?”

“The Philippines.”

“Whatever. Same thing. We let you come here, and you crapped all over our democracy.” He smashed a fry between his fingers. “Why?”

I did it for you, jackass. “I wanted to win.”

He snorted. “Well, that didn’t work out, did it?”

“Obviously not.”

“You know, when you came in here, I figured drugs, maybe vehicular manslaughter. Something like that. But what you did...” His nostrils flared. “Honestly, I can’t believe they let you out of prison already.”

Already? She’d like to see him last two years in a cage, subjected to daily humiliations—as if losing one’s entire life weren’t punishment enough.

“If you ask me, you’re not fit to scrape shit off the bathroom floor.”

His haughty sneer was too much. Another minute and she’d shove fries down his throat till he choked.

Nadine pushed herself to her feet. “I think we’re done.”

“Yeah, don’t call us. We’ll call you.”

She strode to the exit. When she glanced back, he crumpled her application and tossed it onto the tray with the rest of his trash.

Shit. What the hell am I going to do?

* * *

Half an hour later, Nadine returned to Renn House, the transitional housing facility she shared with about twenty ex-offenders. Her two suitemates, Jenna and Jodie, were exactly where she’d left them—lounging on the beat-up couch in front of the television. The judge on *Divorce Court* rapped her glossy nails on the bench while a schlubby husband complained that his soon-to-be ex had failed to lose the baby weight.

“He did not just say that!” Jenna slapped her leg. “Oh my God.”

Jodie looked up as Nadine walked past them. “Hey, how did it go? You get the job?”

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She stopped and faced them. “No.”

Jodie frowned. “Was it because you’re a felon?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, fuck them!” Jodie raised her middle finger. “You’re too smart for fast food anyway. I mean, you’re a damn lawyer. So you fucked up once. So what? You’re still too good to work there.”

“Yeah, fuck ’em all,” Jenna said.

Touched by the genuine support, Nadine calmed down a little. “Thanks.” She trudged upstairs to her closet-sized bedroom and sat on the lumpy twin bed. The cramped, colorless room was like a five-star hotel compared to prison, and she’d been lucky to secure three months of free housing. But where would she go when her time ran out? Landlords would never accept a felon with no source of income. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and scrolled through her contacts, looking for her probation officer.

Nadine had imagined that supervised release would involve frequent meetings in person with her assigned officer, but Michaela had simply told her to text with any problems. Nadine tapped out her message: *I’m having trouble finding a job.*

She set the phone down, expecting to wait for a reply, but it rang almost immediately.

“What’s going on?” Michaela’s deep voice boomed over the rumbling of an engine.

“No one wants to hire me. I hardly get any interviews, and the one I just had was over when he realized who I am. I’m running out of money, and I’m getting worried.”

“I know it’s—shit!” A car horn blared. “Sorry. I know it’s hard when you have a record. How many applications have you filled out?”

“God, it feels like a hundred.” She massaged a knot in her shoulder. “I promise I’ve been applying all over central Virginia. I have another interview on Monday for a retail job outside of Richmond. Some tiny town called Cheriville.”

“Retail?” Michaela sounded skeptical. “You need at least thirty hours to satisfy probation. Most retail is part-time—so they don’t have to offer health insurance.”

“The ad said it’s forty hours per week. And I’m sure the health plan is abysmal.”

“Okay. I hope it works out. If not, you gotta keep trying.”

“I will.” As if she had a choice. “Listen, I need to talk to you about my housing situation. I’m halfway through my stay, and my caseworker said I have to leave when it ends no matter what—even if I don’t have anywhere to go. They already promised the bed to someone else.”

“That’s right. Renn House is ninety days max. No exceptions.”

“But how will I find an apartment with no income?” Even in prison, Nadine had never imagined she would struggle to find a place to live.

“Let’s take it one step at a time. Fuck!” Brakes screeched. “Not you... Look, I know it’s hard with your notoriety. But you’ve got a lot of advantages even as an ex-offender. You’re educated. You’re not on drugs. And you have all your old friends and contacts. Something will turn up.”

At least the first two were true. She hadn’t heard from her so-called friends in years. “Okay.”

“I gotta go. Hang in there, okay? Keep me posted.”

Nadine flopped back on the mattress. Grimy mini blinds split the sunlight into bright diagonal lines on the ceiling. The familiar antiseptic scent stung her nose, and the bass from the TV boomed through the floor. Taking slow breaths, she tried to process the possibility that in six weeks she would be evicted with nowhere to go.

* * *

Nadine tilted the rearview mirror until she could see her face. She smoothed her short black hair and checked her teeth for visible food. That’s what passed for getting ready these days, now that it no longer mattered.

She donned her oversized sunglasses and exited the car, taking in the prosaic strip mall before her. The Overstock Oasis sat sandwiched between a liquor store and a Food Lion, and—judging from the distribution of cars in the parking lot—it was significantly less popular than its neighbors.

The glass doors whooshed open. Four checkout registers sat at the front of the store; only one was occupied. A fair-skinned, curvy woman leaned over the counter, her honey-blonde hair falling forward in loose strands. At first, she appeared to be writing, but when Nadine moved closer, she realized the woman was doodling on receipt tape.

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Nadine tapped on the counter. “Excuse me.”

The woman jumped and lifted her head. “Oh my Lord. I’m sorry. I totally spaced. How can I help you?” Smoky eyeshadow and thick mascara accentuated her golden-brown eyes, and her voice was sugar sweet with a buttery Virginia accent. Aside from her unflattering polo shirt—royal purple with *Overstock Oasis* embroidered on the lapel—she looked like a stereotypical Southern belle.

Did this girly small-town cashier watch the news? Nadine removed her sunglasses. “I have an interview with the store manager. Grady Sanders.”

The woman nodded, then froze as recognition dawned on her face. She stepped back and bumped into the cash register behind her.

Great. Nadine arched an eyebrow. “Is there a problem?”

“Um...no problem.” Biting her lip, she picked up a telephone next to the register. Metallic-purple fingernails caught the light as she dialed. “It’s Bella. There’s, um, someone here to see you... Yes... Okay.” She hung up. “He’ll just be a minute.”

“Splendid.”

Bella stared at Nadine, clasping and unclasping her hands as if she didn’t know where to put them.

Nadine sighed. “I’ll just wait over there.” She turned away.

“Are you...? Do you mind if I ask you...?”

Christ, were they really going to do this? Nadine faced her. “Look, you obviously recognize me.” She held Bella’s gaze, challenging her to disagree.

Bella nodded meekly.

“That means you have an opinion. Everyone does. But I can assure you, it’s nothing I haven’t heard every day for years. So if you already know who I am, and I already know what you think of me, do we have anything to say to each other?”

Bella blushed. “Oh, I didn’t mean...” She glanced around and seemed to spot something in the distance. “Oh, thank the Lord. I mean, Grady’s coming. He’ll be right with you.”

A slim older man with frizzy gray hair ambled to the front of the store. “Hi there. Are you Nah-dine?” He regarded her with curiosity, but his blue eyes were free of judgment, confirming Nadine’s guess that he had no idea who she was. *That’s why I got the interview.*

Nadine stepped forward to meet him. “Yes, I’m Nadine.”

“Grady Sanders.” He extended his hand.

As she accepted the handshake, she snuck a glance at Bella, whose mouth hung open.

Oblivious, Grady smiled. “Nice to meet you. Come on back.”

Nadine followed him to the back of the store, passing the bath and housewares sections on the way. She had never been to an Overstock Oasis before and would never have visited one voluntarily in her former life. The store seemed to specialize in tacky clutter. Mismatched merchandise crowded the shelves, and many items were marked with neon clearance stickers.

When they reached the back, Grady ushered her into a tiny office with a desk and two metal folding chairs. A flat-screen monitor set on a CPU occupied the center of the desk, surrounded by precarious stacks of papers, folders, and binders. One wrong move would topple the piles.

“Have a seat.” He gestured at the chair across from his desk as he plopped into the one facing the computer. “I have your application around here somewhere.”

Nadine waited as he shuffled through the mess. *He really doesn't recognize me.* She braced herself for the question and the inevitable rejection that would follow. Soon she would be another day closer to losing her housing, with no source of income in sight.

“Ah, here we go.” Grady held up a set of papers. “Nadine Bayani.” He pronounced her name with twangy drawn-out vowels. “You’re interviewing for the store associate position.”

“That’s right.” Inside, she cringed at the job title. *Associate* made it sound as if she were applying to be a business partner rather than a minimum-wage lackey.

Grady leaned back in his chair. “I’ll tell you a little about the job. You’ll be working the register, stocking shelves, and cleaning up after customers. Is that the sort of thing you’re looking for?”

Sounds delightful. “Yes.”

He scanned her application. “Now, it says here you don’t have any retail experience. Where did you work last?”

Here we go. “I was a lawyer.”

“A lawyer?” His head jerked up. “Why the hell do you want to work here?”

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“I lost my license to practice law. If you look at the end of the application, you’ll see—”

When he found the relevant section, his eyes widened. “I’ll be damned. You checked the box. I didn’t even notice. What’d you do?”

Nadine considered her answer. “I coordinated the transfer of funds from a large corporation to...a highly regulated entity in violation of federal law.” This, technically, was true. Except that it was completely false.

“Ah, I see.” He nodded. “White-collar crime.”

He still didn’t have a clue. Was she going to get away with this? “I suppose.”

Grady’s face brightened. “You know, we get a tax break for hiring ex-cons. Corporate loves it. But normally, when I see a felony, I think trouble. I don’t want to hire someone who is going to steal and shoot up in the bathroom. But you’re not like that, are you?”

Nadine thought about Jodie and Jenna, who had both been convicted on drug charges. That’s what he meant by *trouble*.

“And you’re Asian.” He smiled. “Asians are good workers. I bet you’re good at math too. Won’t have to worry about your register coming up short.” He steepled his fingers and tapped his chin. “Are you a US citizen?”

“Yes. For twenty years.” She pulled her passport and her Social Security card from her bag.

“Outstanding. Well, listen, Nadine, I’m going to make copies of your documents and send them to corporate. You’ll need to take a drug test. I assume that won’t be a problem.”

“Not at all.” Drug tests were part of her probation, one of many humiliations that had become routine.

“That’s what I figured.” He sat back and crossed his arms. “It takes a few days to get the test results and for corporate to process your paperwork. You should be able to start...let’s see...next Thursday. That work for you?”

That’s it? She had the job? Nadine’s throat tightened as she said, “Yes, that will work.”

Grady gave her some forms to fill out and left to copy her documents. She half expected him to barge back in and withdraw the offer, having realized who she was. Instead, when he returned, he gave her a toothy smile and asked if she had any questions about the forms.

When she had finished the paperwork, Grady escorted her to the front of the store. “Bella! Come over here.”

Bella approached warily. She did a double take when she saw the employee handbook in Nadine’s hands.

Grady beamed. “This is Nadine... What was it?”

“Bayani.”

“Right. She’s our newest associate. Used to be a lawyer, if you can believe that.” He winked at Nadine. “Maybe she can get me out of my next speeding ticket.”

Bella gaped at Grady. “A lawyer?”

“Yup. She worked in corporate law,” Grady said, leaving no doubt that he still didn’t know Nadine was world-famous and universally despised.

“Oh. Okay.” Bella glanced between them with troubled eyes.

Nadine held her breath. If Bella told Grady what she knew, her employment would be snatched away before it began. She cursed herself for snapping at Bella when they first met. If Bella gave her away, it was Nadine’s own fault for being rude. Time seemed to stop as she waited for Bella’s decision.

Bella parted her glossy lips, then closed them. At last, she smiled and extended her hand. “Great to meet you. Welcome to the team.”

“Thank you.” Nadine accepted the handshake, noting Bella’s soft skin and gentle grip.

As their hands broke apart, Bella met Nadine’s gaze as if to remind her that she knew exactly what was up, even if she hadn’t said anything.

Nadine walked back to her car in a daze. The job wouldn’t last, of course. Once Grady found out who she was, it would all be over. But for now, she had an actual job.

Chapter 2

OMG. BELLA TAPPED HER PHONE furiously. Nadine Bayani just left the store. She got a job here. Grady doesn't know who she is.

The sound of a squeaky wheel interrupted her typing. Bella looked up to see a woman steering a packed shopping cart toward her register. *Crap.* She wanted to know Raelyn's reaction before she got sucked into helping customers.

At last, bubbles appeared in the window.

The customer slapped a set of sheets onto the counter. "I hope I'm not disturbing you." Her words dripped with syrupy sarcasm.

"Not at all." Bella set her phone down and plastered a smile on her face. "Did you find everything okay?"

Bella scanned and bagged the woman's items as fast as she could, but another customer pulled up with multiple vases and wineglasses. By the time she finished wrapping each item in packing paper, two more customers had joined the line.

As soon as the last customer left, she lunged for her phone and read the string of texts from Raelyn.

Are you shitting me??? Why the fuck would she work there? Are you sure it was her? Maybe it was someone who looked like her? Shit, I have to go to a stupid meeting. Call me tonight. Better yet, come over. You have to tell me everything!!

Bella wasn't surprised Raelyn doubted her. After all, she hadn't been sure herself when she first met Nadine. At first glance, the woman who walked into Overstock Oasis bore little resemblance to the cutthroat lawyer with long, shiny black hair and tailored power suits. Still, Bella had

watched enough news coverage to recognize Nadine's round face, flat nose, and arresting brown eyes.

Bella typed back, *100% sure. Yes, I will come over. What time?*

No reply. Raelyn's stupid meeting must have started. Bella sighed and pocketed her phone. Just a few more hours of tedium to go.

* * *

Gravel crunched beneath the tires as Bella guided her Honda Accord up the long, narrow road to Raelyn's house. The air buzzed with a symphony of cicadas, reminding her that she was way out in the country. The porch fixture was the only light for a mile.

The front door was always unlocked, and Bella hadn't knocked since elementary school. It creaked as she pushed it open. When she stepped into the kitchen, Raelyn's mom, Kathy, stood to greet her.

"Hi, sweetie! Come here and give me a hug." Kathy's gray hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. She wore her usual retirement uniform of baggy sweats and fuzzy slippers.

"Hi, how are you?"

"Fine, just fine, darlin'. I just made water for tea. Would you like some? I've got lemon, pomegranate, and that fancy chai Raelyn likes."

"Thanks. I'd love some pomegranate." Bella opened the cupboard and helped herself to a tall ceramic mug with daisies painted on the rim.

"Oh my God!" Raelyn entered the kitchen, flush with excitement. "You met Nadine Bayani!" She was still dressed for her job as a bank teller in navy dress pants and a crisp blouse, but she had washed off her makeup.

"You did?" Kathy asked. "Where? I thought she was still in prison."

Bella reached for the teakettle. "Nope. She served her sentence. She applied to work at the store, and Grady actually hired her."

"Wow I can't believe it. Isn't he a Republican? I mean, I'm just assuming because it's Cheriville."

"Yeah, but Grady didn't recognize her. When he introduced her to me, he only said she used to be a lawyer. Like he just learned that today." Bella still couldn't believe it.

"Whoa." Raelyn moved to stand at the counter where Bella was stirring sugar into her tea. "What did you say when he introduced you?"

“I just said it’s nice to meet you. Something like that.” Bella would never forget Nadine’s penetrating eyes.

“Damn. You still haven’t told anyone?”

Bella shook her head. “You’re the only one I’ve told.”

“Goodness gracious,” Kathy said. “Your coworkers are in for a shock.”

“I’ll say.” Raelyn leaned back against the counter. “Wait until they realize they hired someone everyone in America hates. I mean, it’s the one thing Republicans and Democrats all agree on: Nadine Bayani is a piece of shit.”

Bella frowned. “Yeah. I mean, I guess.”

“You guess?” Raelyn raised her eyebrows. “Do you have amnesia? I seem to recall you bawling your eyes out on election night and calling her all sorts of unladylike names.”

Right. That was true. “I remember.”

“It’s *her* fault Rob Gunn is president.” Raelyn narrowed her eyes. “Maybe Nadine was trying to help Alyssa at the time—in her twisted, criminal way—but all she did was cause a scandal that threw the presidency to the Republicans. Don’t forget that none of these terrible things would be happening if it weren’t for Nadine.”

“Yeah. I know.” Just last night, Bella had watched a gruesome report about the humanitarian crisis at the border, a result of Gunn’s anti-immigration policies. Families had been living in makeshift camps for months without adequate food, clean water, or medical care. Anyone with children who crossed the border risked being separated from them. Gunn’s election was the darkest day Bella could remember.

“So why didn’t you say anything? Your boss never would have hired her if he knew the truth. You could have stopped it.”

Bella had asked herself the same question all evening. Like most Democrats, she had spent the past two years hating Nadine. She had never dreamed she would do her a favor, let alone one that allowed her to get a job at Bella’s own store.

“I guess I felt sorry for her.” Bella stared into her tea, now the color of dark magenta. “I don’t know why. She wasn’t even nice. She bit my head off when I tried to ask her a question. But there was something about her...” Bella paused, considering how to explain it. “She just looked like she’d been through hell.”

“She deserved to go through hell. She still deserves it.”

“Maybe.” Bella took a sip of the tart, fruity tea. It needed a little more sugar. “But you know, working at Overstock Oasis—it’s not exactly heaven.”

* * *

Bella peered through the glass door as she fumbled with her key in the lock. No sign of Nadine in the front. Maybe she was in the back? Or maybe she’d already quit, a prospect Bella found strangely disappointing.

“Excuse me, are y’all open?” A middle-aged woman with a tight gray bun had appeared beside her, clutching a canvas shopping bag.

“Not until nine, ma’am.” Bella continued to fiddle with the lock.

“Oh, but I just want to browse. Can’t you let me in early?”

“Sorry, ma’am, it’s store policy.” *What is wrong with this damn door?* Bella looked down. She was using her apartment key.

The woman stepped closer to Bella, crowding her. “That’s ridiculous. I don’t see why I can’t look around—”

“Come back at nine!” Bella slipped through the doors and quickly locked them behind her, ignoring the woman’s scowl. She hurried to the back of the store to punch in for her shift, then froze in the doorway to the break room.

Nadine Bayani, recently released from federal prison, stood at the far wall, reading the OSHA *Job Safety and Health* poster. She wore plain black pants that hung loose on her slim hips. The mandatory purple polo shirt exposed brown arms thick with defined muscles. Bella imagined Nadine doing push-ups in her prison cell, skin gleaming with sweat. She shook her head to banish the image. *Focus.*

Bella padded up behind Nadine, her ballet flats muffling her approach. She cleared her throat. “Hi.”

Nadine whirled around and met Bella’s eyes. She lifted her chin and squared her broad shoulders. “Hello.”

Bella opened her mouth to speak, but Nadine’s defiant gaze bored into her brain, scrambling her thoughts.

A pair of voices sounded in the hallway. Ashley sauntered into the break room, followed by Kenny.

“Hey!” Ashley pointed at Nadine. “You’re new.”

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At the sight of Ashley's leopard-print leggings and bright pink lipstick that clashed with both her purple polo and her red hair, the hostility in Nadine's gaze gave way to bafflement. "I... Yes."

Kenny stepped forward and offered his hand. "Good morning, ma'am. I'm Kenny. What's your name?"

Nadine took in his slight build, blond hair, and earnest smile that seemed to fill his cherubic face. After a long pause, she accepted his hand. "Nadine."

Ashley cocked her head. "So what are you?"

Nadine blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"You know, where are you from?" Ashley asked, seemingly unaware that anyone might find the question rude.

"I'm...I'm Filipino."

"Oh wow." Ashley grinned. "We never had one of those."

God, she must think we're all hicks.

Grady appeared in the doorway. "Oh good. Y'all have met our new associate."

Bella guessed from his relaxed demeanor that he still had no idea he had hired the woman at the center of a national scandal. *Damn.* Usually, Bella arrived for work feeling sleepy and finished her shift in an exhausted stupor, numb from endless hours of boredom. Today, she quivered with anxious energy. Whatever happened, this was sure to be the most eventful workday in years.

Grady turned to Nadine. "You can shadow Bella today. She's our third key. She'll show you around and teach you how to use the register. I'm sure you'll be a quick study, you know, given your previous occupation."

He smirked, but Nadine didn't react, and only Bella knew what he was talking about. "All right. It's almost nine o'clock. Kenny, you're on register. Ashley, stockroom. I'll unlock the doors."

Grady, Ashley, and Kenny filed out, leaving Bella with Nadine.

They stared at each other.

"What's a third key?" Nadine asked.

"Oh, that. It means I have a key to the store. I can also act as manager when Grady isn't here, but I'm not the assistant manager—that's Jason. You'll meet him later." Bella winced as she recalled the slew of right-wing bumper stickers plastered all over Jason's pickup truck promoting gun

rights, the Confederacy, and every Republican who had graced the state with their candidacy in the past decade. He would recognize Nadine from Fox News, and he'd hate the woman who had made a dirty deal on behalf of a Democrat—even though the scandal had benefited his party in the end.

"Anyway, I started as a store associate like you," Bella said. "But then a few years ago, I got promoted to third key."

"A few years ago? How long have you worked here?"

"Um, about ten years. Since I was twenty."

Nadine looked appalled.

She thinks I'm a loser. Bella felt her cheeks warm. She wanted to explain why she'd stayed at a crappy store with incompetent managers for a decade, but what could she say? *I'm afraid I'm not capable of anything better, and I'm too scared to find out for sure.* Instead she said, "I'm supposed to show you around."

"I heard." Nadine waited expectantly.

Crap. Get it together, Bella. "Okay. Cool. Let's get started."

Nadine followed her out of the break room with a weary sigh.

Bella led Nadine up and down the long, narrow aisles of the store. As she pointed out the different product categories, Bella searched her brain for information she could convey beyond the obvious.

"Oh, towels are the worst," Bella said when they reached the bath aisle. "We have to fold them into neat stacks, and the customers rifle through them and destroy it all in seconds. Sometimes they do it right in front of us."

"I see." But Nadine wasn't even looking at the towels.

Bella pulled on a strand of her hair. "Sorry. This must be the most boring tour ever."

Nadine didn't respond, which Bella took to mean that she agreed. It figured. Nadine was used to legal drama and presidential politics. Compared to her former career, the Overstock Oasis was nothing.

When they'd gone through all eight aisles, Bella looked around for something else to explain. "Oh, the music." She pointed at the ceiling where speakers piped out a bubblegum pop track. "It comes from corporate, and we don't have any control over the playlist. It's the same thirty songs over and over, so it can get really irritating. Just try to tune it out."

"Noted."

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“Um, do you have any questions about the layout of the store?”

“No.”

“Well, if you can’t find something—”

“I’ll consult the great big signs hanging from the ceiling.” Nadine pointed to the one above them.

“Oh, right. Great.”

“Do they really not know who I am?” Nadine asked quietly.

Bella glanced around to make sure no one could overhear. The only visible customer was several yards away, rooting through the gardening tools. “They really don’t know. Ashley spends her free time with her loser boyfriend, Tino, and I doubt either of them could name the current president. As for Kenny, he just graduated from his mom’s Bible-based homeschooling program. Neither of them is likely to be caught reading the news.”

“Well, it won’t be long before they find out. I doubt I’ll last the day.” Defeat clouded her eyes.

Bella couldn’t help feeling sorry for Nadine. “Why did you take this job? If you don’t mind telling me.”

Nadine looked away. “I’m required to work while I’m on supervised release. And even if I weren’t, I need the money.”

“That’s rough.” The store barely paid above minimum wage. If Nadine was desperate for income, it meant she had lost everything—her friends, her reputation, and even her savings. “It must not be easy to find work when you’re...”

Nadine’s mouth quirked as she met Bella’s eyes again. “A convicted felon and world-famous pariah?”

“Yeah.” What could she even say to that? “Well, the only thing left to show you is the register.”

At the front of the store, a line snaked out from Kenny’s checkout counter. As soon as Bella approached the second register, the woman who was last in line steered her shopping cart triumphantly to the open counter and began to unload an eclectic array of items.

“I’m training a new employee,” Bella said. “This may take some time.”

“Oh, that’s all right.” She tossed her brown hair behind her shoulder. “I just hate waiting in line.”

Bella showed Nadine how to operate the barcode scanner as she rang up the woman's purchases. The last item was a large pig-shaped lawn ornament with an upturned snout.

"Hold up." The woman pointed at the pig. "That's supposed to be half off."

An orange 50-percent-off sticker adorned the pig, but that didn't mean much. Customers swapped the stickers all the time. Bella checked the date code on the price tag to confirm. The customer was right—it really was on clearance.

"Oh, I'm very sorry, ma'am." Bella pressed the void key and turned to Nadine. "This happens every so often. The computer is supposed to discount the product automatically, but sometimes there are errors. We can't change the price in the computer, so you have to use a dummy SKU and calculate the correct price yourself."

Bella typed "99999999" for the bar code and then checked the price tag: \$37.99. She hesitated, worrying her lower lip while Nadine and the customer watched.

Bella stared at the tag. She had memorized the most common discount prices, but \$37.99 was unusual. *Crap*. Nadine was going to think she was an idiot in addition to a loser and a hick.

Her face burning, Bella pulled her phone out of her pocket. She opened the calculator app, multiplied the price by .05, and keyed the result into the register. She avoided eye contact with both women as she wrapped the cursed lawn pig in a large sheet of paper.

She turned back to the register. "Your total is \$163.88." She should have taken the opportunity to show Nadine how to process a credit card payment, but she wanted to end the transaction as quickly as possible. She grabbed the card and punched the buttons without a word. A moment later, the terminal spit out the receipt.

After the customer left, she turned to Nadine to offer an explanation, but Nadine was staring at the next customer—a bearded man in a camouflage T-shirt. His eyes were glued to Nadine. *Oh no*.

"Hello?" Bella tried to get his attention. "Did you find everything okay?"

The man dropped a set of barbecue tongs on the counter and pointed a bony finger at Nadine. "What the hell is she doing here?"

Chapter 3

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN I can’t just fire her?” Grady’s voice boomed through the wall. “She cheated in the goddamn presidential election!”

Nadine waited in the break room, her chin resting on her clasped hands. In the next room, Grady was shouting at someone from the Overstock Oasis corporate office. The call was on speaker, and Nadine could hear every word through the flimsy wall.

“You knew she had a record when you hired her,” the woman said. “You’ll have to manage her out. Document examples of poor performance. Give her a chance to improve, then document again if she doesn’t perform. *Then* you can fire her. If you fire her right away, she could sue.”

“Customers will boycott the store,” Grady said. “You should have seen the guy who just left. He told everyone else in line who she was, and two people walked out without buying anything.”

“Why not keep her in the back? She can work in the stockroom.”

“Trust me, she’ll be working exclusively in the stockroom. Plus cleaning toilets. And doing every other miserable, dirty, humiliating job I can find until she quits.”

“Just remember to document,” the woman said brightly. “Every time she’s late or insubordinate or screws something up, you write it down.”

“Fine.” There was a banging sound and then silence.

A moment later, he appeared in the break room. “Corporate says I can’t fire you—at least not today. But if you stay, I will make your life miserable. This is your chance to walk out of here before that happens.”

Nadine met his gaze. “I won’t quit.”

“Well, in that case, go sit your ass down in the stockroom. There’s a truck coming in half an hour, and you’re going to unload it. By yourself.” He stomped out, slamming the door behind him.

* * *

The stockroom was dusty and dark, the only natural light coming from a small window next to the delivery door. A single lightbulb hung in the center of the room. Unmarked cardboard boxes were stacked on the cement floor in a configuration that appeared both inefficient and structurally unsafe. A few tall stacks threatened to collapse despite a sea of empty space on the cement floor.

Nadine perched on a large unopened box and contemplated her situation. She couldn’t afford to quit, not when she was losing her housing in a month. She would have to submit to whatever degrading tasks Grady could devise, do the work without any mistakes, and hope she could find another job before he concocted some bullshit reason to get rid of her.

As she waited, she thought of Bella and her confusion when confronted with a simple math problem. How did a woman reach thirty years old without learning to divide by two? Were the schools in Cheriville that bad?

Bella didn’t strike her as someone who lacked intelligence. Plus, she seemed to be the only store employee who followed the news. She wondered if she would be at this miserable job long enough to learn more about her.

Why do I even care?

The delivery door screeched and lurched upward, revealing the back of a massive freight truck. Grady stood next to the truck with his arms crossed over his chest like Mr. Clean, watching as the driver secured a loading ramp to the truck.

When the driver finished, Grady walked up to Nadine and shoved a scanner at her. “You’re going to scan the boxes in that truck and carry every last one of them into the stockroom.”

He turned to the driver. “Don’t help her.”

The man pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket. “Weren’t planning on it.”

Nadine stepped outside, wincing in the sunlight, and walked over to the base of the ramp. The truck was crammed floor to ceiling with boxes,

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some marked *heavy* and others marked *fragile*. Unloading the truck by herself would take hours.

Bile rose into her throat. She wanted to tell that asshole where he could shove his scanner and then march straight to her car and drive fast and far away from the hell her life had become. Instead, she just stood there.

Grady shot her a satisfied smirk and then walked back into the store. She was powerless, and he knew it.

* * *

“I still don’t understand.” Ashley’s frown cracked the orange foundation on her forehead. “What did she do wrong?”

Bella, Ashley, and Kenny were huddled at one of the registers, discussing the scene that had erupted in front of them. Bella had tried to explain the scandal to her politically unaware coworkers, but their expressions remained blank. While Grady had realized who Nadine was as soon as the customer pointed it out, for Ashley and Kenny, there was no bell to ring.

She tried to think of another way to explain. “Okay. Let’s say Overstock Oasis wants the government to pass a new law, like—”

“A law to ban stickups,” Ashley said. “You know, *give me all the money, or I’ll shoot*.” She made a gun with her fingers.

“Well, that’s... Okay, sure. So the company can give money to a candidate who wants to ban armed robbery, but there are limits on how much it can give.”

“Why would there be limits?” Kenny asked.

Bella marveled at his innocence. With his lack of civics education or cognizance of current events, he was like a boy in a bubble, pure as virgin snow.

“Because if Overstock Oasis gave a presidential candidate a million dollars and that person got elected, they might end up serving the company instead of the people.”

“Oh.” He frowned. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Anyway, there are limits. But when Alyssa Jackson was running for president, Atlas Health Source—that’s the health insurance company—really wanted her to drop her plan to cap insurance premiums. So, Atlas used the names of their subscribers to donate more money to Alyssa Jackson—a *lot* more. And Nadine is the one who bribed them to do it. She told Atlas

that when she became White House chief of staff, she'd get the cap dropped from Jackson's healthcare bill."

"So *that's* why everyone hates her?" Ashley twirled her ponytail. "Jesus. It's not like she killed someone."

"Well, it was more than that. People thought Alyssa was involved, and it really hurt her campaign. So when she lost the election, her supporters blamed Nadine." Bella paused. "Honestly, I blame her too. Rob Gunn wouldn't be president if it weren't for what she did."

"Damn." Ashley clicked her tongue. "That chick is famous. How do you know all this, anyway? You watch the news?"

"Yeah, and I get alerts on my phone. I like to know what's going on."

Ashley straightened, her attention drawn to something behind Bella.

Bella turned to see Grady walking up to them with a pissy scowl and his hands balled into fists. She stepped back from the register and looked for something she could pretend to be doing, but Grady didn't seem to notice or care that nobody was working.

"Nadine is unloading the truck," Grady said.

Nadine still has a job? "Um, okay. I didn't realize the truck was here." Bella turned to Kenny. "Do you want to stay on register while I help her unload?" Usually she tried to get out of truck duty, citing cramps or some other ailment, but this time her curiosity outweighed her distaste for manual labor.

"No, you don't understand." Grady held up his hand. "I want you all to stay on the floor."

"Wait," Bella said. "She's unloading the *entire* truck by herself? It's ninety degrees out."

"Hell yes, she's doing it herself—and every truck from now on until she quits or croaks." The sadistic glee in his voice made Bella feel sick.

"But she could get hurt," Bella said. "Or she could get heatstroke and pass out or something."

"Well, tough shit." Grady glanced at Kenny. "Sorry."

Bella had to try again. "I don't mind helping. It would still be hard with two of us."

"No way. None of you are helping that criminal. Kenny, you stay on register. Ashley and Bella, start on the shelves. Garden looks like crap." He turned and stalked off.

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Ashley shrugged a shoulder and headed for the garden section.

Bella turned to Kenny. "Are you okay with this?"

Kenny's face was pale. "Well, uh, Grady is the manager, so we have to do what he says."

"I know, but do you think it's right to punish someone at work for what they did in the past if they already served their time? Because that's what this feels like to me."

Kenny squirmed. Finally, he said quietly, "That's not what Jesus would do."

"I agree." Unloading the truck was, at minimum, a two-person job. Bella would never be okay with what Nadine had done, but this was cruel.

Bella wasn't about to risk her job, especially not for Nadine Bayani, but maybe there was something else she could do.

* * *

Nadine spent the next two hours hauling box after box into the stockroom. She found a rusty handcart that helped, but some of the boxes were so heavy that even loading the cart strained her back. As she ground through the punishing task, rivers of sweat soaking her clothes, she was thankful she'd stayed in shape while in prison. It was the only reason she had the endurance to finish the job.

After she dumped the last box onto the floor with a graceless thud, Nadine collapsed against the pile. She was covered in dirt and sweat. For several minutes, she lay panting from exertion while her body cooled down.

The doors to the stockroom swung open. Nadine's shoulders tensed as she imagined Grady arriving to mock her exhaustion, but instead Bella appeared.

"Hi." Bella sat on a box next to Nadine. "I heard what happened. Um, I brought you a Coke and something to eat." She reached into her purse and produced a bottle of cola and a glazed doughnut poking out of a paper bag.

Nadine's instinctive reaction was suspicion, but Bella's eyes were kind. She accepted the drink. "Thank you." Her voice cracked from hours of heavy breathing. She twisted off the bottle cap and poured the cold, fizzy drink down her throat.

She drained half the bottle before she paused to breathe. "God, that's sweet. I can't remember the last time I drank soda."

Bella looked down. “Oh, sorry. You probably wanted something healthy. Sugar is my biggest vice, mostly because it’s the only vice I can afford on ten bucks an hour. That’s why I need to lose twenty pounds.”

Nadine scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous.” Bella had to know she was beautiful. She had an hourglass figure with a round bottom and large breasts. Her hair caught the light when she moved. Even in her shapeless purple polo, she was stunning.

Bella blushed. “I can’t believe Grady made you unload the truck by yourself. Usually we leave one person on register, and everyone else helps out. Even with a team, it’s hard work, especially in the heat.”

“It’s my punishment for being who I am. The first of many until he can concoct some excuse to fire me.” Nadine took another swig of soda. “Welcome to my life as the woman everyone loves to hate.” She studied Bella. “Why are you being nice to me, anyway? Don’t you care about politics?”

“I do.” Bella shifted. “I, um, supported Alyssa Jackson. I was upset—devastated, honestly—when the scandal happened. I don’t understand what you did, and I probably never will. But that doesn’t mean what Grady did is okay. I just felt like I had to do something to make up for it.”

“Well, I appreciate that. And if you don’t mind, I’ll take the doughnut.”

Bella broke into a smile. “Of course.”

It was soft, fluffy, and coated in gooey glaze. Her empty stomach growled as she swallowed.

Bella stood. “Anyway, I should get back on the floor before Grady catches me in here.” Her hair swished as she walked away.

Nadine tried to remember the last time a stranger who wasn’t a fellow ex-con or a social worker had treated her like a human being. It had been a long time.

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WORTHY OF LOVE

BY QUINN IVINS

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