

Chapter 1

Grace Trumbull waited a long moment to look up from her computer screen when she heard the knock on her office door. She was in the middle of something, yes, but she also wanted to reinforce the message that a closed door meant she did not want to be disturbed. And the summer intern and probable knocker had interrupted her twice already that morning with questions that could have been emailed. Grace had been attentive to him over the past few weeks, giving him time when her colleagues had not. But the crush he had developed as a result of Grace's kindness needed to be discouraged, she had decided, with more unavailability.

But when she slowly shifted her eyes from the screen to the thick glass door, she was surprised and chagrined to see the president of the company, the man who had just last week promoted her to one of three vice president positions, standing patiently on the other side. She leapt up, hurried across the carpeting, and pulled the door open, saying, "Paul. Come in. I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

Paul Broadbent, immaculately groomed and dressed in a pressed khaki suit, got right to the point, as always. "We landed the Maritime Museum account," he said. "I want you to be the lead on this, and I'm going to ask Bradley Hanover to assist. This is top priority for you, so I'll need you to table anything that doesn't require your immediate attention and allocate everything else to Tina and Dan."

"That's good news," said Grace, nodding. "I'll meet with Bradley this afternoon."

"Good," said Paul, turning back toward the door. "You'll be reporting to me. So I'm your contact with questions or issues that arise. Since you were a part of the negotiations with the

client, you're familiar with all the delicacies of the account. I'll have Jen make copies of the relevant documents for your file and send along the electronic versions." And he was gone.

Grace liked Paul. He was hardworking and ambitious, and direct, clear, and concise in his written and verbal communications, qualities Grace admired and practiced. Some of her colleagues preferred working with Dana Shapiro, the other partner in the media relations firm of Broadbent & Shapiro, because he was more human – warm, funny, inspiring. It was Dana who had pushed for Grace's recent promotion, and who had convinced Paul ten months ago to hire Grace instead of a better qualified (if Grace were to be truthful) guy from a reputable Manhattan agency. Their risk had paid off, with Grace bringing in even more business than she had optimistically promised. Dana had praised her efforts, but Paul still regarded Grace with skepticism; he was a tough judge.

And now he wanted Grace to work with Bradley Hanover, his unofficial protégé. Bradley was good at his job, and he was certainly well liked. Paul wasn't the only one who thought Bradley was brilliant and charismatic – the entire staff appeared to be smitten. He was outgoing and charming, and routinely invited his colleagues to lunch in an effort to get to know them better. Grace liked him, too, but hadn't yet been invited to lunch. Perhaps this was because she was so much older, or because she was a vice president. Was he intimidated by her?

They had all celebrated his thirtieth birthday a couple months back, and everyone agreed afterward that it was the best office birthday party ever given. Not only had he spiked the fruit punch with tequila, he had also insisted that everyone play pin the tail on the donkey, and had given out kazoos and whoopee cushions as party favors. She had laughed along with everyone else when he demonstrated – for those who had forgotten – their auditory virtues.

She looked forward to working with Bradley, to getting to know him better – but she knew she would have to set boundaries. He seemed to consider himself exempt from the organizational flowchart, based on how he breezed in and out of Paul’s and Dana’s offices. He might very well think of himself as Grace’s equal.

His confidence stemmed from more than his talents, as he was a shockingly good-looking young man, with dark brown hair worn long enough to brush the shoulders of his suit jacket, suntanned skin, eyes that were blue, or green, or hazel, depending on the light, and lashes that were thicker than most women’s. Grace was careful not to look at him longer than was warranted, or to let him know that she found him as attractive as everybody else. Other women in the office, especially those closer to his age, seemed to feel no shame in openly staring at him, as a baby would a stranger’s face. But Grace regulated her observation of Bradley. She looked at him only when they spoke to each other, which, in the ten months she had been part of the Broadbent & Shapiro team, had been rarely outside of their weekly team meetings. Now that she was going to be working closely with him, she would need to look into his eyes much more often.

Grace told herself that this wouldn’t be a problem. She would be strictly businesslike in her interactions with Bradley. She would give him the attention justified by the assignment. In fact, she knew that the less attention she paid to him, the more attention he would want from her. This wasn’t a game she intended to play, rather it was simply a way of staying on task, of staying focused on the project and her personal goals.

She’d been more cognizant of her goals in the eight years she had been divorced from Kenny Trumbull. When they were married, he had been one of the few people she trusted, as well as loved, but she had been too willing to do what he wanted, to adhere to his schedule. Her

refusal to have his child was one of the rare instances that she hadn't gone along with his plan. And it was, ultimately, the reason for their split.

Since her divorce, Grace had dated a number of men, who were initially attracted by her good looks; she was a slim, fit, tall, nicely proportioned, forty-two-year-old woman. But after several dates, most of the guys had stopped calling her. One, when questioned in a text by Grace, told her he had been turned off by her aura of superiority, a chill, that he said was as off-putting as it was arrogant. He was wrong about her, but she didn't attempt to change his mind.

Maybe Bradley had similar ideas about her. Grace presented a confident, professional, and, some might say if asked, impenetrable persona to the world. And she had a very good reason for this portrayal. Underneath was a woman who could be loving and soft sometimes, but very few were allowed an encounter with Grace's soul. Yet, there was something behind Bradley's eyes when he looked at her in meetings that told her he already knew this.

Chapter 2

Bradley emerged from Paul's office with a grin on his face. Finally, he would have a chance to work with Grace Trumbull, the newest VP, who was brilliant in his and Paul's estimation, and gorgeous by anyone's standards, with her light green eyes and cream-colored skin, her wavy black hair and shapely body and legs. Bradley, at thirty, was interested in more than appearance, but what a woman looked like was what first grabbed his attention. He didn't think this was a gender thing, that only men sought the company of attractive partners. Women were guilty, if that was the word, of the same thing. They swiped through images on Tinder just as swiftly and with just as much snap judgment as men.

He had already checked Grace out on Facebook. She didn't have an active presence, so he was able to discover very little about her. He knew she was divorced and forty-two years old, twelve years his senior. Bradley found this age difference intriguing, a refreshing alternative to spending time with women in their twenties. Women his age were searching for their place in the world, in addition to looking for life partners. In contrast, Grace had a sophistication and self-assurance that he found sexy as hell.

He wondered, as he walked down the hallway to his office, why he was thinking about Grace in romantic terms. Perhaps he had been attracted to her all along? Bradley pushed these thoughts aside, reminding himself that Paul Broadbent took a very dim view of office romance. And he had heard from others and observed in meetings that the best way to impress Grace Trumbull was with hard work. With her, it was always about the work. She was respected and, in general, liked, not because of her desire to commingle with her colleagues – no, Grace was

admired because she got the job done and done right the first time. Everyone wanted to work with her.

Bradley walked past Grace's office on the way back to his cubicle. She didn't glance up from her computer screen, did not seem to register his presence at all. Perhaps this was because her door was closed. And everyone in the office knew that when Grace's door was closed, she wasn't looking for pop-in company.

He was able to see Grace in her office from his work space. He had to wheel his chair back away from his desk, which he did several times a day to reach his file cabinet or to work at the table pushed up against the wall opposite his desk. Whenever he looked down the hall at her office, at her, she appeared to be working diligently, either at her computer or at her desk. When she was on her cell phone, she stood behind her desk, looking out the side window. Occasionally she'd lean down to jot notes on one of her legal pads.

He had never once caught her looking at him. And why would she? He was thirty; she was forty-two. Did she consider him a child? If she did, this project would change that. He decided to write her an email about their new partnership, about his enthusiasm.

"Bradley."

"Shit!" he said, startled to find her standing next to him, wondering how she had arrived at his desk without his knowing, or if there was any way she could know what he had been thinking. "I'm sorry, Grace." He liked her name, the sound of her name coming out of his mouth. "I didn't see you standing there."

"Yes."

"Well," said Bradley, recovered and smiling now. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you have a minute to come into my office?"

“I sure do.” Bradley sprang out of his chair. “I’m all yours.”

He followed her down the hallway, past the line of cubicles. Bradley noticed that a few co-workers looked up at them as they walked by. Bradley could think of two reasons for this: one, Grace hardly ever left her office, except for team or client meetings or lunch. And two, she had never stopped by his cubicle before. Because she had left her office for him, Bradley had the urge to high-five the three guys watching them, to celebrate the fact that he was now on his way to the inner sanctum of the beautiful Grace Trumbull.

As soon as they were in her office, she shut the door behind them and indicated with her hand that Bradley should sit in one of the white leather barrel chairs facing her desk. She settled into her own chair behind it, but because the desktop was glass, Bradley could still see her lovely legs, her tanned feet in summer sandals, the toenails painted a light gray, and her pale pink skirt. He stopped himself, quickly and firmly, from picturing himself standing behind her and leaning over to see something she’d written on one of those legal pads, from being close enough to her to smell her hair and her skin.

“So, we’re going to be working together,” she said, reaching for a manila folder on the side of her desk and setting it down in front of her. She opened the file and kept her gaze fixed on it, as if she needed notes to question Bradley. “Are you familiar with the Maritime Museum?”

“I am,” said Bradley.

“And what’s your impression?” She lifted her light green eyes to look at his face.

Bradley hesitated a moment longer than was warranted, as he absorbed the intensity from her eyes, and then he shrugged. “It’s a place you take people who are visiting from out of town if they are interested in maritime history. It’s a place you need to visit just once with each guest. Frankly, there are a lot more interesting things to do.”

“Very good,” said Grace.

“Very good that people want to visit only once?”

“No,” said Grace. “Your impromptu analysis was very good. It’s very bad that people think the Maritime Museum is worthy of a single visit. That perception is our focus; it’s what we’re going to change. I’d like to meet with you every Monday and every Thursday to assign and review weekly tasks. We’ll meet more often if needed. We have our first meeting with the client next Tuesday at two. I checked your schedule on Outlook, and it looks like this works for you.”

Bradley took his phone out of his back pocket and checked his calendar. “Yes,” he said. “I’m free.”

“Good,” she said. “I’ll send you the pertinent information, as well as the list of things I’d like you to accomplish by next Monday. I’ll send you a meeting request for Monday afternoon, so we can make a plan for our session with the client the following day.” Grace closed the file and set it aside.

Bradley looked at her. “Is that it?”

“Wear a suit.”

“What?”

“To the meeting,” said Grace. “Wear a suit – and a blue tie. The president of the museum is not only nautical, but he’s also a Democrat.”

“Okay,” said Bradley. “That sounds good.”

Grace had already broken eye contact. She was looking at her computer screen, her right hand on the mouse. “I look forward to working with you.”

Bradley stood. “Me too. I’ll check my inbox for everything I need to prepare for the meeting.”

“Yes,” said Grace. “Let me know if you have questions.”

Bradley walked back to his desk, eager to get started. He couldn’t wait to impress Grace Trumbull.

Chapter 3

When Grace and Bradley walked out the back door of the building the following Tuesday at one, they immediately felt the late June heat rising from the asphalt parking lot. Grace removed the cardigan sweater she kept at their overly air conditioned office and draped it over her arm. She then reached into her handbag for her sunglasses. “Do you want to drive?”

“When I could be riding in your sky blue Cadillac?”

Grace looked at him through the green-tinted, aviator lenses. “You know my car?”

“Grace, everyone in the office knows your car. It’s the only cool car in the lot. Well, except for Paul’s Tesla.”

The Cadillac had been Kenny’s mother’s car. After she died, Kenny’s dad, a weekend mechanic and car show enthusiast, restored the interior, exterior, and engine, and then parked it in his garage and threw a tarp over it. He drove it just once a year, in honor of his wife’s birthday. He gave the car to Kenny and Grace as a wedding gift, and Kenny gave it to Grace in the divorce, because she had liked it much more than he had and because he still loved her, even though he was the one to suggest the dissolution of their four-year marriage. “What do you drive?” asked Grace.

“A Honda Civic.” Bradley pointed to the silver car at the other end of the lot. “Reliable and manly.”

“Manly is a reach,” she said, smiling. “I’d describe it as practical and safe.”

“That’s what my parents said. They gave it to me when I totaled my bike.”

Grace stopped and looked at him. “Oh, that doesn’t sound good.”

“It was five years ago,” said Bradley. “I was hit by a car, and yes, I’m fine.”

Grace rested her hand on his arm for just a moment. “Good,” she said, then continued walking. When they reached her car, she opened the driver’s side door and got in.

“You don’t lock it?”

“I don’t leave anything in here that anyone would want to steal.”

“Except the car itself,” said Bradley, settling into the passenger seat.

Grace put the armrest down between them, turned the key in the ignition, dropped the top, and then backed it out of the parking space. Five minutes later, she realized that she was showing off her driving skills to Bradley, zooming down the highway with one hand on the wheel, changing lanes as if she owned them both. She asked herself why she was acting this way. Shouldn’t he be the one trying to impress her?

“Tell me about this car,” Bradley shouted.

“It belonged to my former father-in-law, who gave it to my former husband, who gave it to me,” said Grace. “Tell me about more your Honda Civic.”

“It was a gift a month before my twenty-fifth birthday,” said Bradley. “When they asked me what kind of car I wanted – well, within reason – I definitely should have been more specific.”

Grace nodded. “A Honda is a pretty tame car for a young bachelor.”

“I’m not that young,” said Bradley. Grace smiled at his remark. He was *definitely* young. Did he want to appear older because he was with her?

Grace switched on the radio, which, for a fifty-year-old car, worked remarkably well, and for the next half hour, they talked about a marketing idea that had come to Grace in the night, as well as rehearsed the scenarios they had discussed the previous afternoon. When Bradley revealed a couple of details about his personal life, Grace offered nothing similar in return, her

upright posture and eyes-on-the-road profile broadcasting that her personal life was definitely personal.

The meeting with the museum executives was more productive and interactive than Grace anticipated. Because she, like Bradley, thought of the Maritime Museum as a boring, rainy day alternative to the beach, or just about any other fair weather destination one might choose on a weekend, she was surprised by their imaginative exhibits and educational programs, and by their willingness to reinvent themselves, to launch the museum into modern times and current culture. Yes, it was a maritime history museum, but its sphere of knowledge was much larger than the history of the several tall ships it owned. The biggest obstacle to their success was a lack of persuasive and captivating advertising, the dissemination of images and text that would attract not only the boating enthusiast and the maritime scholar, but also families and millennials. Both Grace and Bradley had been unaware, until they had prepped for the meeting, of the museum's changing business model; that, for example, in the next twelve months, the museum would expand its seasonal schedule to full-year operations. The very next week, ground would be broken for an architecturally stunning new exhibit building that would feature a spacious gallery, perfect for art shows, in addition to exhibitions about the sea and whaling. And because the museum had recently been awarded a seven-figure grant from a heavily endowed family foundation, management was now able to spend the money needed for print, radio, television, and internet advertising that would help transform the image of the museum as a one-and-done destination to a living American history museum that people would want to visit frequently for its exhibits, noteworthy lectures and presentations, and experiential learning for all ages.

When they walked out of the building, Bradley made a fist and rocked his elbow backwards. "Yes!" he said. "That was an awesome meeting."

Grace smiled and said, “I most definitely agree. They know where they are now. They know where they want to be. And they’re willing to part with a serious amount of cash to make it happen.”

“A boatload, one might say,” said Bradley.

“You’re funny,” she said. “I think the president is still laughing at your Moby Dick joke.”

“Had you heard that one?”

“No,” said Grace. “And I was really grateful the punchline was not what it could have been.”

Bradley laughed. “That’s the beauty of the joke.”

“Yes,” said Grace, offering him another quick smile. “You were good in there. I can tell they like you.”

“They like you, too,” said Bradley. “As do I.”

Grace turned her head to look at him. “Are you trying to butter me up?”

“Absolutely.”

When they got back in the car, Bradley said, “What’s our next step?”

“I’m confident we can give them exactly what they want and need,” said Grace, starting the car. “Let’s begin with some video that’s hip and upbeat to let people in on this secret.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” said Bradley. “Short videos, two minutes or so in length. With some memorable thematic music.”

“Yes,” said Grace. “Upbeat music is key; no sea shantys. Shoot me some ideas by the end of the day tomorrow so we can discuss them at our Thursday meeting.”

When they pulled out of the lot and onto the street, Bradley ran his hands along the dashboard and said, “God, I love this car. Your ex-husband was crazy to give it to you.”

“Not crazy,” said Grace. “Just kind.”

Chapter 4

Distracted by paperwork that needed to be done before she could allocate more time to the museum account, Grace didn't meet with Bradley until late in the day on Thursday. She had rescheduled their 3 p.m. meeting to 4:30 p.m., and Bradley had accepted, telling her that he was available to work late that night. They worked side by side at the cherry conference table in her office, Bradley on his computer, Grace with a legal pad. They worked through five o'clock. They worked through six o'clock. They worked through seven o'clock, when Bradley told her he could use a beer. "What?" she asked, looking up from her notes.

"It's after seven," he said. "Can we take a break?"

As if she didn't believe him, Grace looked at her watch. "Of course we can. I had no idea it was this late. I'm so sorry. Do you have somewhere you need to be?"

"Right here," he said. "I need to be right here. But I could definitely use a break."

"Yes, of course," she said. "I think we can wrap things up. We've accomplished our goals for the meeting. You must be starving."

"I'm more thirsty than hungry," said Bradley, smiling at her. "Let's go across the street for a beer and a burger."

"I like that idea." Grace stood up, put her hands on her hips and arched her back. "I never sit for three hours straight."

"Me neither. Paul actually gave me permission to order a standing desk. I'm still weighing the pros and cons." Bradley stood too, and Grace realized when he did that he and she were just about the same height, five feet nine inches.

“I’ve heard good things about standing desks,” said Grace, transferring her notes and several folders to her desk, where she would review them in the morning. “You’ll have to let me know what you decide. Dana raves about his.”

Bradley nodded as he tucked his laptop under his arm. “Let me run this down the hall to my office,” he said. “I’ll be right back. Dinner is on me.”

“Dinner is on the Maritime Museum,” she told him.

Bradley flashed a grin. “I like the way you think.”

All the booths were taken at Tapped, the unofficial Broadbent & Shapiro office outside the office, where many of Grace’s and Bradley’s colleagues had a beer or two before heading home for the evening. It was more of a bar than a restaurant. Yes, Tapped offered a dozen kinds of burgers, including two vegetarian choices, but they also served twenty-five varieties of beer, many of them made locally, all on tap. Plus the bar itself, a large, yellow pine semicircle, dominated the space. Because the daily happy hour that ran from four o’clock to six o’clock was long over, and because it was a Thursday night and not a Friday night, only half of the normally occupied bar stools were taken. Grace and Bradley set their briefcases down on the floor and parked themselves in two tall stools that looked like they could have been made in high school metal shop, with their crudely fashioned seat backs and wiggly welding.

“What can I get you?” asked Bradley.

“Whatever you’re having,” said Grace.

“I’m having a shot of bourbon and a Cranky.”

“Perfect,” said Grace, even though she had not had a shot of anything since her friend Shannon Greene had decided a few months back that getting drunk was more emotionally

affordable than getting laid. Their drink that evening had been vodka, a word Grace still had trouble saying without grimacing.

As soon as Bradley turned to get the attention of the bartender, she was there, with her smoky eye makeup and scoop-neck T-shirt. And while Grace understood the female bartender uniform, worn to generate generous tips, she sometimes wondered how much it mattered. What was more important to customers – attitude and service or skin? She looked at Bradley’s face as he ordered, noting that he looked into the eyes of the bartender, aptly named Brandy, instead of at her chest. Brandy returned his gaze, her pupils increasing in size as he ordered, her lips parting. She looked at him like the younger women at the office looked at him, like she was hungry.

There were six – no, seven counting the new hire – women in their twenties that worked for the firm. And Grace had noticed that they all changed in Bradley’s presence. They became more affable and more alert, focusing on his face, on his magical, multicolored eyes. The good ones could double major, taking in both his face and his words, tucking away details, mentally filing his likes and dislikes for future encounters. Grace was almost two decades older than at least three of these co-workers. At her age, Grace understood their motivations better than they did, better than she understood her own.

“What shall we drink to?” asked Bradley, handing Grace one of the shots that had been set down on the bar in front of them.

To us! Grace thought about saying, if only to watch the registration of incomprehension in Bradley’s eyes, if only to ease what seemed to be an awkward moment between two people who could have been on a date but weren’t. Still, it felt like a date. She and Bradley were together after business hours, drinking at a bar, with not a single co-worker in sight. Plus, Grace

didn't want to talk about work – they both needed a reprieve after what had been a productive but exhausting meeting. But she didn't want to talk about herself, either, to bring up a history that she hid from view and conversation. “To working together,” she said.

“Salute.”

Halfway through her beer and Bradley's story about the trials of being potty-trained too young – how had this come up? – Grace reviewed what she had eaten that day, which amounted to a vegan protein bar in the morning with a large coffee from the drive-thru and a yogurt and apple for lunch. When Bradley ordered another round, Grace knew she should get something to eat, but she was also enjoying the moment they were in, enjoying being entertained by Bradley instead of entertaining him. When they walked into the bar, Grace thought she might have to do that, as the elder of the two, as the supervisor to the underling, as the woman to the man – but here he was telling her stories that were meant to be heard by close friends and family, the kind of story she rarely heard. She leaned in to listen more closely. She laughed freely.

Before the end of the second beer, what started out as a drink with a colleague after work officially became the date it had actually been from the moment they sat down at the bar. Grace didn't realize this right away, but anyone watching her, watching them would have noticed that the number of times they smiled at each other was on the rise; that they looked at one another exclusively, both appearing to be tuned out to their surroundings; that they lightly touched each other's hands, arms, and legs as they talked. It was the long, slow kiss, normally done in private, that eradicated any trace of doubt.

Grace looked into his warm brown eyes and whispered, “God, you taste good.” He kissed her again, liquefying her insides. Seconds later he was paying the bill, and then he and Grace were rushing out of the restaurant as if they were running through the airport for an imminent

flight. Holding hands and carrying their briefcases, they ran across the street laughing. Grace hadn't felt this free since she left home at eighteen. If Bradley picked up his pace just a little bit, she could be airborne! They ran around the building to the dark parking lot, occupied by Bradley's Honda and Grace's Cadillac. They chose the back seat of the Cadillac, unzipping, unbuttoning, pulling and pushing, breathing and sweating, until they lay still.

Lying on her back, Grace kept her eyes closed, even though she could sense that Bradley's were open, that he was on his side looking at her. She needed a moment to process what had just happened, but also to linger in its sweet aftermath. He did not attempt to sit up, or to reach for his shirt or his pants. He seemed content to lie beside her, with his arm wrapped around her waist. Grace had never wanted to stop time, until now.