

NOW

*Friday, June 7, 2019*

Pamela

I sit on a mahogany leather sofa in the waiting area of Clifford Investments, salivating at the thought of my goal being within arm's reach.

Finally, after two failed attempts, I may actually get to work with the man whose career I've been following for the past decade – Andrew Clifford III, founder and CEO.

A ringing phone snaps me out of my reverie. My eyes flit to the receptionist, who turns away from the TV mounted to the wall to answer.

“Good afternoon, Clifford Investments. How may I help you?” she says to the caller, a professional but friendly lilt to her voice.

My gaze moves from the receptionist to the TV. I read the news ticker at the bottom of the screen: *Clifford Investments shares are up due to ongoing merger talks*. A French-manicured hand on the sleeve of my blue blazer pulls me away from the latest headlines. My eyes lock on what looks like a three-carat engagement ring and a matching wedding band.

“What time is your appointment?”

I look into the face of my competition—the one person standing between Andrew and me. “It’s at four.”

She glances at her phone. “I’m scheduled for five. I know I’m early. But you know what they say, early—”

“—is the new on time,” I interject.

She smiles, revealing bright white teeth and dimples. Her brown skin is flawless. She reminds me of a young Michelle Obama. Exuding confidence, dressed in a black pantsuit with black pumps, she looks like she should be running her own Fortune 500 company rather than interviewing for an internship at one. It pays, but still.

“By the way, I’m Veronica Johnson.” She extends her hand and I reciprocate.

“I’m Pamela Carter.”

“Can you believe we made the cut? It’s down to just the two of us. Two African American women. It’s amazing. I remember the first day of interviews. This lobby was packed.” She smiles smugly.

A slight grimace crosses my face just thinking about the three rounds of interviews I’ve endured this past week. The two previous times I applied, I only made it through two rounds. And now I’ve reached the pinnacle. An interview with the man himself—the one who will decide if I’m fit for the position he created five years ago to level the playing field for women in business. A feeling of accomplishment sweeps over me when images of the fifty remarkable women who started on this venture come to mind. And now there are two.

Veronica taps me again. She’s definitely the touchy-feely type. “So, what do you think it’s going to be like meeting Mr. Clifford?”

A rush of adrenaline flows through me when I think about sitting across from Andrew. “I’m not sure.”

“I’ve read a lot about him,” she rattles on. “He graduated from Crumwell. That’s my alma mater. Where’d you go?”

"Flenoir University."

"Oh." She gives my hand a sympathetic pat. "By the way, I love that blue blazer. It really brings out your green eyes. I was going to wear a dress today, but I began this process wearing pants. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, right?"

"Right." I smooth my hand over my skirt, wishing Veronica would stop talking. I don't mean to be rude, it's just that I need to focus.

"Did you know that three of the last five women who've had this internship ended up starting successful hedge funds?"

"I heard," I say, fidgeting in my seat. My eyes dip to my phone. It's five minutes to four. Hopefully, they'll stay on schedule.

Veronica taps me again. "Can I share a secret?"

"Sure," I say, tentatively, wondering what juicy tidbit she's going to drop. She scoots closer, and her perfume fills my nostrils.

"My husband bet his brother that I won't land the position."

"Why would he bet against you?" I say, frowning.

"Because he's trying to jinx me. He thinks a job like this would put too much pressure on me."

"I don't understand."

"I'm with child—two. We're having twins," she whispers. "I'm four months along. It's our first."

My gaze dips to her midsection and tears prick my eyes. I turn away and grab tissue from my purse.

"Are you okay?" she asks as I dab at my face.

"I'm fine. I have allergies. I think my meds are wearing off," I lie. "Anyway, congratulations."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. It's just that a friend of mine miscarried twins a few months ago. She was devastated. We all were." *More lies.*

"I'm so sorry."

"You're barely showing."

"Wearing black makes everything look smaller. Do you have any chil—?"

The double doors next to the receptionist open and Andrew's executive assistant, Shelley Wong, appears. I want to smother her in kisses for coming to the rescue. A petite woman in her late sixties, she looks like she works for a billionaire. Dressed in a tan silk pantsuit and red-soled shoes, with a strand of pearls dangling around her sagging neck, she emits an air of experience and confidence. She's worked for Andrew for fifteen years. She's one of his most loyal employees. She used to work for his father's firm in New York. That's where Andrew was born and raised—Scarsdale, to be exact. Veronica's not the only one who's done her homework. He got his bachelor's in economics *and* his MBA from Crumwell University. He came to California when he was my age—twenty-five. Word on the street is that he wanted to make it on his own, not ride the coattails of his rich father.

"Ms. Carter, Mr. Clifford is ready now," Shelley says.

Veronica and I share a knowing glance, then I waste no time getting up. I make my way over to Shelley, who gives me an approving once-over and then motions me toward Andrew's office.

I glance at the portrait of Andrew on the wall near the receptionist's desk, then follow close behind Shelley while we pass the executive offices. My eyes fix on her salt-and-pepper hair that's in an updo. She stops at the end of the corridor and looks over her shoulder to give me a reassuring smile as she opens the door, revealing Andrew's huge corner office. She steps inside with me on her heels.

"Mr. Clifford, meet Pamela Carter. Let me know if you need anything. I'll be in my office."

"Will do," he says.

She leaves and he and I lock eyes. I stand frozen in the middle of his office, waiting for him to speak, but he just

peers at me while he comes from around his black marble desk with gold inlay. My eyes flit to the matching credenza behind his desk. It's lined with family photos—a picture of him and his wife standing next to their yacht, front and center. He met Rebecca in Dancing Hills eleven years ago. She's a beautiful, svelte, red-haired socialite twelve years his junior. Their photo is flanked by pictures of their children, a ten-year-old boy and seven-year-old girl. They look like their parents' mini-mes.

The opposite wall is adorned with photos of Andrew with politicians and dignitaries; plaques; awards; and his degrees from Crumwell. An oversized stuffed tiger wearing a Crumwell jersey, the university's mascot, sits underneath his unabashed hall of fame.

My eyes dip to the massive hand reaching out to me. "It's nice to finally meet you, Pamela."

When I extend my hand, my fingers and palm are swallowed by his too-firm grip. "It's nice to meet you as well," I say, looking up at him. He's roughly six feet tall and has an athletic build that's accentuated by his custom-made blue suit. His clean-shaven face breaks into a smile and the corners of his blue eyes form soft crinkles. He's even better looking in person.

He sweeps his hand to motion me toward a black leather sofa. Before I sit, I admire the painting above of a woman in profile with what looks like another profile superimposed on her face.

He notices and says, "It's a Picasso. It's a portrait of his second wife, Jacqueline Roque. I paid eight million for it." He says it without flinching, as though he spends more than that on lunch.

"I thought it was a Picasso," I say, not wanting to appear uncultured. Then I add, "It's quite impressive," in case he needs validation. But from everything I've read about Andrew, the only thing bigger than his ego is his bank account.

"I'm a sucker for beautiful art. I commission a lot of pieces. The portrait of me in the reception area was done by a very talented painter out of Boston. I bet he'd be delighted to do your portrait. He likes painting beautiful women. I had to damn near promise him my right arm to get him to work with my old mug. He'd jump at the chance to immortalize those big green eyes of yours, your little turned-up nose, and rosebud mouth. And I love the blond hair. You're uh...biracial?"

"I'm *black*, Mr. Clifford."

"Oh...uh...excuse me...I...you're so...light...I mean..."

His gaze flits to my raised brows. He clears his throat and moves on.

"Anyway, I like that you're wearing your hair down. I try to get Shelley to color her hair and let it loose, but she's stuck on her bun or whatever that up in the air look is."

Thinking that he's crossed a line, a slow flush creeps up my face. I wonder if I'll make it through the interview without him ogling my ample bosom and my legs.

We both sit and he rakes his thick blond hair with his fingers and says, "I'm impressed."

I expect him to add "with your resume" to his statement, but he doesn't, so I respond coyly, "I realize the importance of first impressions, Mr. Clifford, but don't you think you need to interview me first?"

He emits a husky laugh. "Pamela, as you may have noticed, not many people can survive hell week. You've interviewed with some of the sharpest people here at the firm—my *crème de la crème*. They're professional bullshit detectors. They're able to see beyond your resume and social media accounts. They read people and they do it well. The fact that you're sitting on this ten-thousand-dollar sofa with me speaks volumes as to who you are and what you have to offer."

I swallow hard and sit erect. "Thank you." I clasp my hands and try to focus. But it's difficult, because I suddenly

realize that this job is mine and Veronica is his backup plan, in case I decline his offer. But that would never happen, because when I get this position, I'll be able to destroy Andrew—bring him to his knees and take away everything that he holds dear.

"So, I hear you're new to Dancing Hills," he says. I start to answer him, but before I can, he rises and says, "Forgive me. Would you like something to drink?" He walks toward a cabinet adjacent to his desk, then flings open the door, revealing shelves lined with expensive liquor. "What can I get you?"

"Thank you, but Shelley's assistant offered me coffee. And I've had plenty."

"Glad to hear Tabitha's on her A-game. I prefer tea over coffee. It calms me. He shuts the cabinet, sits, and repeats himself. "So, you're new to Dancing Hills?"

"Yes, I am. I grew up in West Los Angeles. And as you know, I did my undergrad and graduate work at Flenoir. I moved to Dancing Hills to be closer to your company."

"I like that." He nods approvingly. "I believe in acting as though you've already achieved the goal you have in mind. When I moved here twenty years ago, I actually staked out property for my offices. That was before I really knew I would have a firm. Are you familiar with the movie *Field of Dreams*?"

"Yes."

"If you build it, they will come," we say at the same time.

His eyes light up and he claps his hands. "You're sharp, Pamela. Hell, you weren't even born when that movie came out."

"It's my mother's favorite. She's a huge Kevin Costner fan."

"What about your father?" he asks, his face turning serious.

"He passed away five years ago. Heart attack."

"My condolences. That must have been difficult."

"It was. Mom is coping though. She's a strong woman. She's a retired teacher. I recently introduced her to gardening. That's my passion—that and business. Financially we're good. My father sold real estate and did well. My mother and I are comfortable, but I don't want to depend on that. I want to pave my own path."

"I certainly can relate. That's why I left New York and came to California. I wanted to get out from under my father's shadow. Like you, I needed to create my own wealth."

I nod.

"I'm sure your father would be proud of you," he adds.

"Thank you. Speaking of family, yours is beautiful."

He turns toward the credenza. "Family is everything." Then he gets up, goes to his desk, and retrieves a thick leather wallet from the top drawer. "I keep their photos with me all the time." He flips open his wallet and flashes pictures of his family in my face. While feigning interest, I make note of his numerous credit cards, including a JP Morgan Chase Palladium Visa made of actual palladium and gold. He returns the wallet to the drawer and joins me back on the sofa. "But business is my life. I work hard so that my family has what they need and want. I'm building an empire and leaving a legacy. When I take my last breath, my firstborn will be given the keys to the kingdom. I have to admit, it's difficult to balance my work and my home life at times. Do you have any child—? Don't answer that. I've been warned by human resources. I know I'm not supposed to ask those kinds of questions."

"No worries. No, I don't have children, and I'm not married. Getting this internship is my number one priority. I know it's going to require long hours and my full attention, and I'm totally committed."

Andrew leans back, obviously impressed. "You're right, the position requires dedication, Pamela. But the rewards



will be worth it. My proteges have successful hedge funds and have taken top positions in Fortune 500 companies. As an intern, you'll have the opportunity to work with my team and learn from them, but more importantly, you'll be shadowing me in all meetings, here and abroad. I'm going to teach you everything you need to know in order to be successful in business, things that you could never learn in school."

"That's why I'm here, Mr. Clifford."

"Please, call me Andrew. My father is Mr. Clifford, and he's retired." He pauses, then gives me the once-over. "You're really focused for your age. You're what my grandmother would call an old soul. Hell, when I was your age, I was a hellraiser. If I'd had an ounce of your discipline, I'd be a trillionaire today. What can I say? Boys will be boys."

I suppress the urge to scowl upon hearing his last statement and say, "I've always been a determined person, Andrew. When I fix my eyes on a prize, I don't stop until I obtain it."

He bursts out laughing. "I like that. Do you have any questions for me?"

"What inspired you to create this position?"

He stares thoughtfully at the ceiling as though he's trying to conjure an answer. Then he finally says: "Something happens to a man when he has children, particularly daughters. It changes you. Softens you in a way, makes you care more. And then there's karma. I believe in it. I'm just doing for other people's daughters what I'd want someone to do for mine."

Eerie silence fills the room and then he calls my name.

"Pamela?"

I blink several times, bringing myself back to the present.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I was...huh...moved...moved by what you said."

Quickly, I continue. "When hired...I mean *if* hired, will I have an office in the executive suite?"

"Of course."

"Do you know when you'll be making your decision?"

"Monday morning. I need to meet with the team to make final assessments. Once you're given the offer, you'll be expected to come in immediately to sign the contract and attend orientation."

"I understand."

He starts to speak but stops when his cell phone rings. "Excuse me," he says, walking to his desk.

I take a moment to glance at my phone while he answers the call. My mouth curves into a smile when I see a text from my mother with an emoji of a tomato.

*Good luck with your interview. So proud of you. Call me when you're done so I can start dinner. Want it to be ready when you get here. I'd love for you to spend the weekend with me. Let's go shopping. Love Mom.*

My smile fades when Andrew drops the f-bomb. I start to leave, wanting to give him some privacy, but he signals for me to remain seated. Red in the face, nostrils flared, pacing in front of the floor-to-ceiling window, he gesticulates like a wild man. I look out at the breathtaking view of the mountains, hoping his tirade doesn't go on too long.

"What are you talking about...Matthew, we were supposed to meet today, not next week! Don't play with me, man...What letter of intent? You're getting ahead of yourself...I don't like being blindsided...No, you listen to me, dammit! Matthew, don't you hang up on me!" He stares at the phone, then slams it on his desk. And within seconds, he composes himself, acting as if the call had never taken place.

I sit there trying to maintain a poker face. I want to prove to him that I have thick skin, that I'm up for the corporate drama. "Was that about the merger?" He furrows

his brow and ignores my question. *Damn, that's not good. I hope I haven't gotten inches from the finish line only to lose the race.*

He straightens his tie and his face lights up with a boyish grin. "Where were we?"

"We were just finishing up. Unless you need something else from me."

"I know everything I need to know, Pamela. This meeting was about chemistry. Can I work with you? Is there a fit?"

"I see."

"Okay. We'll be in touch, Pamela. And if you have any questions in the interim, please reach out to Shelley or Tabitha."

"Will do." I shake his hand.

"By the way, great blue blazer. Blue's my favorite color." *I know.* "Thanks, Andrew."

He opens the door and I leave, my body still abuzz from the encounter.

When I get to the reception area, Veronica anxiously asks me, "How'd it go?"

"Hmm. So-so, I'd say."

"Really?"

"Good luck." I turn away from her before she sees the smile plastered to my face. I can't let her know I aced it, because then she'll up her game.