

SAILING AT SUNSET

CINDI MADSEN

THANKS TO EXTENSIVE GOOGLING BEFORE her interview, Danae knew Walter had been stationed at the naval base in Connecticut. Once he retired, he returned to Newport, where his family had founded and run Barton Boats since the 1930s.

“There’s nothing like being out in the open water, on the confines of a boat, to get to know people very well in a short amount of time. Lieutenant Jeffers drove me crazy at first.” Mr. Barton tapped the image of the guy to the right of him in the photo. “But having to work so closely with him led me to understand his viewpoint and how to best utilize our strengths and weaknesses. Now he’s one of my oldest friends.”

The way he talked about the lieutenant sent a warm fuzzy sensation through Danae. Surely this was the type of inspirational story that led up to giving her the promotion.

Right?

Deep down, she knew she was the perfect candidate for the Chief Marketing Officer position. While a tad biased on the subject, she worked longer hours, could multitask better than anyone else in the office, and was way more creative than Mark—who most certainly did *not* use color-coded glitter pens.

“I won’t hold you in suspense any longer,” Mr. Barton said, and Danae held her breath, alternating

between visualizing her success and assuring herself she'd be okay either way, even if it would hurt her pride to lose one more thing to Mark. "As you know, I adored your pitch for our new campaign." Her boss made an invisible rainbow with his hands. "Barton Boats. Not just a boat, but a lifestyle."

This seemed rather like suspense, but Danae didn't say so.

"It's brilliant," he said. "As are you."

Is there a but in there? Please don't let there be a but. "Thank you, sir."

"That's why I'm appointing you Barton Boating Company's Chief Marketing Officer."

Time stopped.

Then sped up.

Since jumping up and down and squealing the way she had at a reunion boy band concert (not all that long ago) wasn't professional, she kept it to a contented expression and slight nod. "I won't let you down."

"I want you to oversee the changes that'll incorporate our new slogan, start to finish. This means you'll be heading up advertising, PR, social media, the website—all of it. You're going to be the team leader, and that comes with a lot of responsibility. Extra stress, too."

"I'm ready," Danae promised. She'd worked to put herself through college and had secured a job before graduation. Work gave her a sense of satisfaction she hadn't found anywhere else. Plus, the bump in salary would help her achieve her other long-term goals.

Nothing showed you how important it was to live well within your means like almost losing the roof over your head. Her parents had never bothered with a

backup plan or savings, and after Dad died, the bank had come dangerously close to foreclosing on their home. *Never again.*

“Whenever you have time, I’d love to run a few ideas by you,” she added. Over this past month, she’d felt a little crazy spending all her spare time on concepts that could very well go nowhere, but it’d been worth it. “I can’t wait to implement them.”

Mr. Barton held up a hand. “I appreciate your excitement, but for now, I’m considering this an interim position.”

For now? Interim? The air whooshed out of her, taking her enthusiasm along with it. “I, um...What exactly does that mean?”

“It’s important to build a strong connection with your team.” The leather chair creaked as Mr. Barton leaned forward. “It’ll be your biggest challenge, honestly. While I admire your drive, sometimes...” As he paused, her anxious imagination supplied a dozen caveats. “You need to learn to look at things from others’ perspectives. To fully listen and process before you jump to do it your own way. I have faith in you, Danae, but I need to see what you’re made of. I need to see that you’re capable of being a team player.”

Danae worked to hold her smile in place. Criticism—constructive or not—had always been hard for her to hear. Part of the reason she’d become so organized was to avoid making mistakes. “I’ll work on that, Mr. Barton. I promise.”

“Happy to hear it.” He picked up the photo she’d accidentally knocked over and tapped the faces behind the glass. “As I mentioned earlier, there’s a surefire

way to do precisely that. And we just so happen to sell boats.”

It felt like he'd given her half of an equation, and without the rest, how could she possibly solve for X? She didn't want to start off her trial period asking for clarification, yet confusion set in, leaving the wheels in her mind spinning.

Glee danced along the curve of Mr. Barton's smile and managed to catapult her apprehension to the next level. “I'm sending you and the team on an eight-day chartered cruise. Everyone's done so well this past quarter, so it'll be half reward, and half bonding exercise. It'll also be the perfect way for you to prove to me that I made the right call. Come back with a solid marketing plan that everyone's agreed upon, and I'll make the position official.”