



The Sheikh and the Single Mom

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Description: He set out to crush her, but things soon went awry, Can he betray her still, after so much has been shared?

Nina Kendrick has fought for her success. As the single mother of twins, she has no other option but to make her company thrive. Approached by an intimidating rival, ruthless businessman and sheikh Rashad Al-Zayed, her guard is well and truly up. The problem is, he's just her type...

Rashad is used to being single-minded in the pursuit of success, but something about Nina knocks him off balance. He figures they can settle their differences with a relaxing weekend at sea, but when she brings two surprise plus-ones to their meeting, it's not long before things start to go off course, as Nina's adorable toddlers seem intent on blocking any time hammering out business proposals, and more focused on running riot on his luxury yacht.

Even as the lines between business rivals and friends become blurred, Rashad knows Nina is forbidden fruit, the competition, the main thing standing between him and success in the US. No matter how distractingly beautiful she may be.

Adorable twins or not, his job here is to crush her. His company is his only baby, after all. And soon, just like all his other conquests, she'll be forgotten. Right?

What he doesn't realize is that, by the time they part ways, their futures have already been altered forever...

Total Pages (Source): 49

CHAPTER 1

RASHAD

Rashad Al-Zayed, sheikh of Al Soub and prominent businessman, was feeling good. It was a regular Tuesday afternoon, and he'd just closed a huge deal with Medtech Nord, a prominent medical company in Germany. The deal had been six months in the making, but Rashad had gotten what he wanted — as he always did. Now, his own company, Health Trackr, was free to thrive in the European market, with the benefit of Medtech's infrastructure and technology.

Rashad reached for his cup of strong Al Soubi coffee and took a long sip. At thirty-two years old, he'd established himself as a leader in the business world with his company. He'd developed the enterprise, from creating the initial idea to rolling out the business, first in Al Soub, then in other Middle Eastern countries, and now in Europe. Germany had been one of the last holdouts where Health Trackr had struggled to gain a foothold.

That was over now. Just like in the Middle East, just like in Australia and New Zealand, Europeans would now be downloading the Health Trackr app as their first step towards addressing their medical needs.

Rashad took another long sip of his coffee and looked out the window. His office looked out over the palace gardens, and it was a truly gorgeous view. Palm trees danced in the desert breeze, the water feature sparkled in the bright sunlight, and Rashad could almost smell the roses in his mother's garden. For many second sons, just living in a palace like this would be enough, but not for Rashad. He'd never been

satisfied with being the backup for his older brother, Khalid, who would soon take over from their father as the sheikh of Al Soub. Instead, Rashad had built a business himself, from scratch, and had made a name for himself in doing so. Since Rashad had no interest in being part of a family, Health Trackr was the closest he would ever come to a baby, and he treated the company as such.

Germany wouldn't be the end of Health Trackr's expansion, either. Certainly not. Apart from a quick celebratory cup of coffee, Rashad wasn't about to rest on his accomplishments. Instead, he reached for his cell phone and dialed Hameed Al-Kitabi, his assistant and second-in-command. Hameed answered on the first ring.

"Did you hear about the Medtech Nord deal going through?" Hameed asked.

"Of course." Rashad grinned. "It's great news."

"Certainly. You should be proud."

"I am, but that doesn't mean that we can stop pushing Health Trackr forward. I think it's time for a new challenge."

"What do you have in mind?"

"It's time to take on the US market. Health Trackr is a household name across much of the world, but we haven't even tried the United States yet. The app is ready. The market is ready. We're ready."

"We're ready," Hameed echoed. "Shall I call a meeting of your business partners?"

"Please. Set the meeting for early next week. By then, we can pull together a full assessment of what will be needed to dominate in the US market. Once you set the meeting, let's both get started on research. As always, I want to know everything —

what similar apps are on the market, who might cause us trouble during rollout, and where our customer base will be.”

“Certainly. I’ll get started.” Hameed hung up, and Rashad sat back in his chair, savoring the last bit of his coffee. Life was good. If his success in other regions was any indication, within a year Health Trackr would be bringing in huge profits from American consumers. After all, health was the one thing that brought everyone together, no matter where they were from or who they were; everyone needed quality healthcare and better management of health records when they got sick. That was what Health Trackr offered, and that was the basis for the app’s astounding success.

The next Monday, Rashad was sitting in one of Health Trackr’s main office conference rooms across from his two principal business partners and Hameed. Abdul Boursani, Health Trackr’s Chief Operating Officer, tapped his fingers on the table.

“The US market, Rashad? I have to say that I’m pleased. You know I’ve been pushing for a move like this for a while.”

“I know, and I’m on board. I just wanted to wait until I could be sure that we’d thrive in the American market before we rolled out. We all have money and our reputations in this game. We have to win.”

“With you at the helm, I’m confident that we will.” Abdul nodded, his fingers still tapping. “You have my full support to start the rollout.”

“Thank you. How about you, Amira?”

Amira Kadif, Rashad’s Chief Financial Officer, didn’t answer right away. She was looking out the window with a distant expression, which Rashad recognized by now as an indication that she was thinking deeply about the topic at hand. A moment later, she turned to Rashad and nodded.

“I’d like to hear your specific strategies for the new market, particularly regarding our competition, but I agree with Abdul. It’s high time that Health Trackr joins the American market.”

Rashad’s heart lifted, though he kept his expression professionally neutral. He trusted his business partners, who’d been with them almost since the moment he’d begun Health Trackr, implicitly. If they agreed that Health Trackr, and Rashad, were ready to join the US market, that was an excellent sign. Beyond the business opportunities, Rashad was looking forward to a trip to the United States after many years of not visiting.

“Wonderful. Speaking of competition, I’ve had Hameed do a little preliminary research into our adversaries in the US market. Hameed?”

“Just a moment.” Hameed tapped a few keys on his computer, and the projector screen lit up with a smattering of logos. “Myresearch has shown that there are numerous companies in the health market in the United States, but not many of them cover the same range of services that Health Trackr offers. Most of them reach smaller segments of the population, such as people with diabetes or pregnant women. Here’s a breakdown of the number of users of the second through tenth most popular health and wellness apps in the United States.” Hameed clicked to another slide.

“That’s a good start,” Hameed said. “With a little targeted marketing, I feel confident that we can draw most of those customers to Health Trackr by showcasing that Health Trackr is a more holistic app. It’s a similar strategy to the one we’ve used in other countries.” Not many of the companies had a significant market share, which was a good sign.

Amira and Abdul nodded as Hameed went on to the next slide.

“There’s one company that’s likely to cause a little more trouble,” Hameed

continued. “This app, Heartbeat, offers similar services to Health Trackr and is used by a wide segment of the population. Heartbeat is distinct from Health Trackr, in that it focuses on early diagnoses of disease and connecting people with affordable healthcare, but there are too many service-area overlaps, and Heartbeat is drawing many of our potential customers.”

“That will likely take a more personal approach, like we used with Medtech Nord,” Amira put in. She knew of Rashad’s success in face-to-face business dealings.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“I agree.” Rashad turned to Hameed. “Have you identified the CEO of the company?”

“I have.” Hameed clicked to the next slide. “The founder and CEO is a woman named Nina Kendrick. She keeps a lean staff of employees, mostly on a freelance basis, and appears to run the company primarily on her own.”

Rashad leaned forward to examine the picture of Nina Kendrick that Hameed had put up on the screen. His first impression was that she was gorgeous. The picture, clearly a professional shot, showed Nina wearing a cream-colored blouse and standing in front of a blue background. She had curly blond hair, which was half loose around her shoulders and half pinned back on the sides. Her blue eyes sparkled, as though she were thinking of something deeply amusing, and the corners of her mouth were slightly lifted. If Rashad had met her in a club or at a conference, he might have flirted with her.

Nina Kendrick wasn't an option for flirting, though. She was his rival, the main person standing between Rashad and the success of his business. No matter how beautiful she was, she was his competition first and foremost.

“Do you know why she runs the company on her own?” Rashad asked. “Do her profits not cover a staff?”

“According to her interviews, she chooses to maintain a small staff so that she can keep the app affordable,” Hameed said.

Rashad smiled at that. It meant that this Nina probably had a kind heart, which likely

meant that she was trusting — and that he wouldn't have too much trouble undercutting her. If that thought made him feel a little guilty, since Nina's clear blue eyes were still smiling at him from the large screen, he didn't dwell on that.

"Have you identified any opportunities to approach her?" Rashad asked next.

"I have." Hameed flipped to the next slide, and Rashad smiled again. His second-in-command knew him well. "Ms. Kendrick is based in San Diego, where she'll be attending a networking event for healthcare companies next week. That would be a good opportunity for you to approach her."

"Perfect." Rashad folded his hands. "I'll have my travel coordinator make the arrangements. In the meantime, Hameed, please find out everything you can about Heartbeat and Nina Kendrick. I want a full dossier by the time I meet Ms. Kendrick."

"Of course."

Rashad turned to Abdul and Amira. "Do either of you have anything to add before I make the arrangements?"

Abdul shook his head, but Amira looked thoughtful again.

"What's your plan for dealing with Ms. Kendrick?"

"It depends," Rashad said. "After I get to know her, I'll either use the information I gather to undercut her company in the open market, or I'll offer a buyout if her app has anything that we can use."

Amira nodded. "All right. Keep us updated."

"I will." Rashad got to his feet. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting with the

developers to get to.”

“I’ll join you.” Abdul got to his feet.

“Perfect. Let’s go.”

As Rashad and Abdul made their way downstairs to their next meeting, Rashad found that he was having trouble getting the image of Nina Kendrick out of his mind. He was no stranger to beautiful women, but something about her stayed with him. Perhaps it was the way her eyes sparkled or the confidence with which she held herself as a female founder in a male-dominated industry. Soft heart or no, Nina would be a worthy opponent, and Rashad found that he was looking forward to meeting her.

If he felt a little bad about putting her out of business, well, that would soon be forgotten. Rashad cared about nothing more than he cared about his company. He’d poured more than a decade of his life into Health Trackr, to the exclusion of anything else. After all, why should he have hobbies, a social life, or a family of his own when he could chase the thrill of expanding his business beyond what anyone had expected?

By the time Rashad was sitting down for the meeting with the developers, he was more or less able to put the picture of Nina out of his mind. He would meet her soon enough, and he’d put her out of business not long after that.

That was just the way things worked.

CHAPTER 2

NINA

Nina Kendrick pulled into her driveway and leaned back in her seat, taking a deep breath. It had been a long day, filled with meetings and endless hours of coding — just like every day was. Well, no one got to be a success in the world of app development unless they were willing to put in the work — which Nina was. After studying biology in college, she'd mixed her scientific knowledge with coding skills extracted from hours of self-study and online courses and founded a successful healthcare app, Heartbeat.

Nina was incredibly proud of all her hard work — she just wished she had a little more time with her babies. Her kids, Kate and Miles, adorable three-year-old twins, were the lights of her life and were the only reason she left work at a reasonable time and refused to go in on the weekends. Before they were born, she'd barely left the office.

Nina pulled out her keys as she climbed the steps to her front door. She lived with her twins in a ranch-style house in one of San Diego's sunny, palm-lined suburbs, where the kids could walk to their preschool and she could drive easily to Heartbeat's office. Inside, Kate and Miles were sitting on the couch in matching dinosaur pajamas, snuggled up on either side of Amanda, their long-term babysitter. At the sight of Nina, they both sprang to their feet and rushed her like tiny twin bulls, blond heads bobbing at knee level.

"Mommy, Mommy!" Miles shouted joyfully.

"Hi," Kate replied a little more quietly, beaming up at her mother as though the sun had finally come out after days of rain.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Nina scooped the kids into her arms, balancing one on each hip. As she did so, she noticed that her twins were becoming heavier. She wouldn't be able to hold them both like this much longer, so she'd savor doing so now.

"Hi, sweethearts." Nina smiled down at her kids. "How was your day?"

"In preschool we learned about colors!" Miles said excitedly. "Did you know blue and green makes yellow?"

"No, silly," Kate said, shaking her head. "Yellow and green makes blue."

"You're both so close, but it's yellow and blue that make green," Nina said. She kissed them each on the head. "Amanda, thank you so much. I'll tuck them in, but then I have to be out the door again, like we discussed."

"No problem." Amanda looked up from the book she'd been flipping through, her brown ponytail flipping back over her shoulder. Amanda was a local college student studying education. Nina had hired her for the first time eighteen months ago, when Amanda had been a sophomore, and she'd spent many hours taking care of the twins ever since. Amanda was an absolute lifesaver, which Nina told her multiple times a day.

"I'll be right back." Nina carried the twins up the stairs. "So, you learned about colors. What else?"

"We read a book about mice," Kate informed her.

“Wow, was it a good book about mice?”

“Yeah.”

“And Amanda took us on a walk to look for rocks,” Miles added. “For my rock collection.”

“Did you find any good ones?”

“Yeah, like a billion.” Miles rested his head on Nina’s shoulder.

“More like four,” Kate put in with a big yawn.

Upstairs, Nina settled them into their beds. For now, the twins were still sharing a room, although Nina had offered several times to give them each their own space. Every time, both Kate and Miles shut her down, saying that they’d be lonely in their own rooms.

Nina tucked Kate into her penguin-themed blankets, then did the same with Miles’s sheets covered in basketballs and footballs. She read them a story, sang their good-night song, then tiptoed out, shutting off the light. Her heart felt heavy that this was all the time she got with her babies today, but tomorrow was Saturday, and she’d have all day with them.

With her kids in bed, Nina hurried to her bedroom, where she exchanged her blazer and slacks for a blue dress with a flared skirt and a pair of low heels. She would have rather crawled into bed and drifted off to sleep after her long day, but networking was important, and events like this were a major contributor when it came to attracting funding and support for Heartbeat. It was important — and it was worth putting off a relaxing evening to go.

Nina glanced at herself in the mirror on the way out. She looked nice enough, she thought. The dress brought out the blue of her eyes, and her hair looked pretty in her usual half-up, half-down style. Downstairs, she stopped in the living room to say goodbye to Amanda, who had moved to the table and gotten set up with a textbook and her laptop. In her UC San Diego hoodie and ponytail, she reminded Nina of herself back in college.

“Thanks again for staying late today,” Nina said as she took her keys and a light jacket from the hook by the door.

“No problem. The twins are a joy, and I always appreciate the extra pay.” Amanda looked Nina up and down. “Are you off on a date?”

Nina almost snorted with amusement. “No, definitely not. It’s just a networking event for health companies like mine.”

“Too bad. You look really nice.” Amanda smiled cheekily.

“Thank you, but dating is just not on my radar right now.” Or ever. The last serious relationship Nina had been in was with the twins’ father. They’d dated for almost a year before Nina had gotten pregnant, but when she’d announced that she was expecting a surprise baby — twins, no less — he had let her know in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t interested in being a father. Nina had been disappointed, but it had taught her an important lesson. When it came to dating, the wrong one just wouldn’t do for her and her kids — and she would rather build her business and spend time with her beloved children than try to find the right one.

“Aww.” Amanda made a pouty face. “Well, have a nice evening. I’ll be here.” She glanced at her textbook with a look of resignation.

“Thanks again. Feel free to raid the kitchen.” Nina waved goodbye to her babysitter

and headed outside. Even now, in January, the San Diego air was warm and fresh, and the light jacket Nina had grabbed was more than enough. She got into her car, turned the radio to her favorite oldies station, and hummed along as she drove towards the event. It was taking place in a large hotel venue downtown, one Nina had visited several times before. A grumble in her stomach made her hope that the passed hors d'oeuvres would be filling — she hadn't had time for dinner, beyond a quick granola bar at the office between meetings, as was often the case. She liked to cook, but there wasn't much time for that now.

The drive wasn't long. Nina pulled up in front of the hotel, tossed her keys to the valet with practiced ease and a "thank you," and went inside, her long skirt bunched in one hand. The venue was the hotel's ballroom, and it was nearly full already. A mix of familiar faces, mainly Nina's peers in the healthcare industry, stood side by side with new people, likely investors or newcomers to the market. Nina hesitated near the entrance for a moment, then made her way to the bar. She didn't drink much since becoming a mother, especially at events like this — it was better to keep her wits about her. Instead, she requested a Coke with lime.

"Coming right up." The bartender turned to pour the drink, and Nina leaned against the bar, surveying the room. Ideally, she'd be able to secure another investor or two this evening. If nothing else, though, keeping current with trends and developments in the healthcare industry would help her to ensure her app remained the best on the market.

"Whiskey, neat."

Nina glanced to her left and caught sight of a handsome man in a neatly tailored suit. He had short, dark hair and eyes so brown they were almost black, as well as light brown skin. He wore a watch that Nina estimated cost as much as most families made in a month, and that, along with his easy posture and the look of amusement in his dark eyes, told her that he came from money. He had a strong jawline, a muscular

build, and at least six inches on Nina. Within seconds, she pegged him as the kind of guy it was better to keep her distance from.

“Just a minute, sir.” The bartender slid Nina’s cola across the bar to her before pivoting to make the whiskey. Nina took a sip of her drink.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Hello there.”

Nina glanced at the newcomer, who had now turned his intense gaze on her. She felt a pleasant shiver down her spine, something she hadn’t experienced in a few years. That was the main reason it was better not to get involved with a guy like this: he was just her type.

“Hi.” She concentrated on her drink. “Are you new here?”

“I am.” He held out a hand. “I’m Rashad Al-Zayed.”

“Nice to meet you.” Nina took his hand, which was warm and firm without lingering too long. “I’m Nina Kendrick. Are you here today as an investor?”

“No.” Rashad accepted his whiskey from the bartender. “Actually, Nina, I’m here to talk to you.”

Immediately, alarm bells went off in Nina’s head. Something about this handsome man was just a little off — he was too smooth, too self-assured. It was as though he simply had to wait for whatever he wanted to fall into his lap, and Nina wasn’t sure she wanted to know what he was waiting for now. Perhaps there was more reason to stay away from him than just ill-fated attraction on her part.

“Is that so?” She raised her eyebrows.

“It is. Your app, Heartbeat, is very impressive. I’d love to pick your brain about it.”

“Hmm.” Nina leaned back against the bar and took another sip of her cola. “Then why approach me at the event, instead of making an appointment with me?”

“What can I say? When I realized we were both attending tonight, it felt like kismet.” Rashad winked, and Nina heard another chorus of alarm bells. If she had to guess, it seemed as though Rashad had approached her here instead of setting up an appointment because he had reason to believe that she wouldn’t want to meet with him. His flirtatious sidestep just reaffirmed her suspicion.

“Well, I’m certainly happy to help.” There was no reason to be hostile, even if she was unsure about Rashad’s intentions. “If you tell me more about yourself and your company, perhaps I can offer some helpful advice.”

“Oh, come now. Why would I want to talk about myself when I’m in the presence of such a successful and lovely woman?”

It was another flirtatious sidestep and another piece of evidence for Nina’s growing suspicions.

“All right. What exactly would you like to know?”

“Everything.” Rashad leaned closer and Nina caught the scent of a smokey aftershave. She appreciated men who made the effort to smell good but, like Rashad’s flirtations and his attractiveness, the good scent wouldn’t distract her. “How do you attract your customers? What does your turnover look like? Who’s on your team?”

“Essentially, you’d like my secret to success. Is that it?”

“That’s exactly it.”

“Well.” Nina folded her arms and met Rashad’s dark eyes. He had surprisingly long

eyelashes for a man. “There are only a few reasons you’d want to know that. You could be a journalist looking for an exclusive scoop — but based on your appearance and lack of recording device, I would guess that isn’t it. Perhaps you want to invest in my company, but then there’s no reason you wouldn’t tell me that up front — you’d get a better sales pitch if you did. So, I have to assume that you represent a rival company and that you want information from me, either to make me an offer or to try to steal my customers. Does that sound about right?”

“Nina.” Rashad pressed a hand to his chest. “What if I’m genuinely interested in getting to know you better?”

“Then I’d tell you that I’m not looking for love tonight.” Nina flipped her hair over her shoulder. “So, Rashad, tell me. What is it that you want?”

“A gentleman never tells, not right away. Let me buy you a drink first. Let’s talk a little before we jump to any conclusions.”

“My drink is almost full.” Nina held up her glass. “And I’m more and more certain that I’ve come to the right conclusion about you. I have a lot to do this evening, so if you’ll excuse me, I’d better be on my way.”

She nodded at Rashad politely and stepped away, only to feel his hand on her arm. She raised her eyebrows and looked down at his hand until he removed it.

“I think you’ll want to hear what I have to say.” Rashad held out a business card. “My yacht will be docked in the marina all weekend. Come. We’ll talk.”

“I have a busy weekend.” Nina wasn’t going to commit to anything. “I don’t have much time for trips to the marina.”

“I’ll take you on a sail.” Rashad smiled. “Trust me, you’ll be glad you talked to me.”

He didn't seem at all fazed by her hesitation, and, once again, Nina got the impression that this was a man who always got what he wanted. Unfortunately for him, he wouldn't get what he wanted from her.

“Thank you for your card. Good night, Rashad.” Nina tucked the card into her purse and made a beeline for a group of investors with whom she'd spoken before. This wasn't the first time she'd met someone who asked about her company with ulterior motives, and it wouldn't be the last. Nina simply needed to put Rashad out of her mind and focus on the evening at hand.

Later that night, tired and footsore from an evening of socializing, Nina returned home. She paid Amanda and sent her home, checked on her sleeping twins, then took a quick shower and got into bed with her laptop. There, she fished Rashad's business card out of her purse and typed his name into the search bar of her computer. It was time to find out why he'd been so shifty.

The answer became almost instantly clear — Nina had been right. Rashad Al-Zayed was a sheikh from Al Soub, the younger brother of the next in line to rule. He was also the CEO of a health and wellness company called Health Trackr, which explained his interest in Nina's company.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

A few more minutes of research made Nina increasingly glad that she hadn't shown Rashad her hand. Apart from his huge success, he was known for his ruthlessness. He was willing to undercut companies, manipulate the market, poach employees and customers — anything to achieve dominance. Clearly, whatever deal he wanted to offer her wasn't one she should take.

Although, perhaps he didn't want to offer her a deal at all. Perhaps all he wanted was to find out as much as he could about her company so that he could beat her in the market. In that case, he would probably try to sabotage Nina's company whether she met him on the yacht or not.

Nina tapped her finger against the edge of her computer, her thoughts swirling. With a few more keystrokes, she pulled up an image of one of Rashad's yachts — apparently he had three, each one larger and more lavish than the last. It had been years since Nina had taken a proper vacation. Single motherhood and business ownership meant that she was on the run every minute of the day, with little time to relax.

Perhaps it would be possible to solve more than one of her problems at once. If Nina went to meet Rashad on his yacht, she could gain information about his plans. If he made her an offer for her company, she could politely turn him down to his face — it was the principled thing to do. If he tried to plumb her for information about her company, she could do the same to him and achieve a better understanding of his plans. That way, if he came after her company later, she'd be ready.

And either way, whether he had a business deal or competition in mind, Nina could enjoy an afternoon of sailing on a yacht that probably cost ten times as much as her

childhood home.

Nina sent a quick text to Amanda, asking if she could come back for the day on Saturday. She felt a moment's guilt at leaving her children on the weekend, a time she usually reserved for them, but shook it off. Dealing with Rashad would help her company survive, which would help her provide for the twins. Anyway, she wouldn't be gone more than a few hours.

To Nina's surprise, Amanda texted back right away, confirming that she'd be available to watch the kids. Nina thanked her before putting her phone away again and turning her gaze back to her laptop. Rashad's handsome face grinned at her from the screen, looking self-assured and confident. Nina shook her head.

After a few more minutes of scrolling through articles about Rashad Al-Zayed, Nina closed her laptop and set it on her bedside table. Turning off the lights, she lay back and pulled the covers up. As she drifted off to sleep, an image of Rashad, leaning against the bar and looking at her as though he could see right through her, played in Nina's mind. She'd need all her wits about her this weekend.

CHAPTER 3

RASHAD

Rashad poured himself a cup of strong coffee and opened his laptop. It was after eleven at night, but he was still used to the Al-Soubi time zone, where it was morning now. Plus, he had work to do, and he couldn't afford to waste too much time on little luxuries like sleep. A few clicks later, he'd joined a video call with Abdul and Amira, who both looked put-together and very awake.

"Rashad." Amira leaned forward, folding her fingers together. "I wasn't sure we'd hear from you tonight."

“I figured I would give you a quick update.”

“That’s very much appreciated.” Abdul tapped a few keys, likely opening a document to take notes. Of Rashad’s two business partners, Abdul was the more meticulous and concerned with records. “Did you meet Nina Kendrick?”

“I did. We spoke briefly at the event, as planned.”

“What were you able to find out from her?” Amira asked.

“Not much, not yet. She’s fairly closed off and seemed suspicious of my intentions — which makes her smart. We barely discussed her business, but I was able to talk to several of her investors and one of her employees at the event. She’s business-savvy, but kindhearted — she wants to help people. That should be a good foothold.”

“Do you foresee any issues getting her out of the market?” Abdul asked.

Rashad hesitated. An image of Nina, leaning forward with a knowing smile as she told him that she wasn’t interested in further discussions, flickered through his mind. She’d been even more lovely in person than in her online pictures. Smarter, too. It was clearer than ever that she’d be a worthy opponent — but Rashad had squared off against worthy opponents before, and he’d always emerged victorious.

“No. It shouldn’t be a problem. I just need to formulate the best strategy — a buyout, direct competition, a hostile takeover — we’ll see. I should know more after I’ve had the chance to talk to her, which should be soon. I offered her a meeting this weekend.”

“And she accepted?”

Rashad smiled, a slow smile. “Not yet, but she will.” He always got what he wanted

in the end. Despite Nina's noncommittal attitude at the event, he knew she'd agree to the meeting — a smart businessperson always agreed to a meeting in order to learn as much as possible about a potential rival. Nina was nothing if not a smart businessperson.

“Excellent. Keep us updated.”

“Of course.” Rashad hung up the call and sat back, reaching for his cup of coffee. To his surprise, he felt a little guilty about how cavalierly he'd told his partners that he could get Nina out of the market. Perhaps it was because she was beautiful, or perhaps it was because all evidence pointed to the fact that she was kind-hearted and cared deeply about others. It didn't matter either way. Rashad would never allow himself to grow soft, not when it would mean losing his chance to dominate the US market.

Even if Rashad had wanted to go easy on Nina, Abdul and Amira would have pulled him back. They had their money and their reputations in this game just as much as Rashad did, and they would have stopped him from making a mistake. He was lucky to have them.

Rashad pulled up a spreadsheet of numbers from Health Trackr's sales in Germany to date. It was a blatant attempt to distract himself from thoughts of Nina Kendrick, and it worked — seeing sales skyrocket in the new market was further proof that Rashad's strategies did what they were supposed to. Nina and Heartbeat were just obstacles to success, the same way that Medtech Nord had been in Germany, the same way that Well-Track had been in Australia. In a few weeks, he wouldn't have to think of Nina Kendrick, her evaluating blue eyes, and her flattering blue dress that accentuated her feminine curves, anymore.

Rashad directed his attention to a pile of emails that had come in during the evening. The last was from Nina.

Mr. Al-Zayed,

Thank you for your generous invitation to a meeting this weekend. I'll come by tomorrow around eleven.

Best regards,

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Nina Kendrick

Once again, Rashad smiled to himself. It was just as he'd expected; he always got what he wanted. Nina had seemed hesitant to meet with him, but now she'd agreed to sit down with him. Something had changed her mind, and, although Rashad was curious, it didn't matter what. He only needed an hour or two with her to find out everything he needed to know. After that, it wouldn't be long until he had a strategy to deal with her company, and Health Trackr would rise to the top. As always.

Quickly, Rashad emailed back.

Dear Nina,

Thank you for your quick response. I look forward to meeting with you tomorrow. Please pack for a weekend of sailing along the coast.

Best,

Rashad

Still smiling, Rashad turned his attention to the next order of business. He was looking forward to seeing Nina the next day, though he didn't want to look too closely at why.

Rashad didn't sleep until late that night. When he woke the next morning, he had time to make use of the yacht's gym and check in with the bare-bones sailing crew he employed for sea voyages. After a quick breakfast, he changed into a casual pair of

shorts and a top. A glance in the mirror of his cabin showed a man who looked relaxed and at ease. Rashad ran a hand through his hair and gave a casual smile. That smile was one he'd developed over time, and it was one of the most effective ways to throw off his opponents. If they thought he was relaxed, they were more likely to let their guards down, which made Rashad's job that much easier.

A glance at his watch showed that it was almost time for Nina's arrival. Rashad headed to his ship's first balcony, which had an excellent view over the dock. He'd be able to spot Nina coming and welcome her with a glass of champagne. They would begin their meeting, pause for a light lunch as they sailed out of San Diego Bay, and resume in the afternoon.

Yet eleven o'clock came and went with no sign of Nina. Despite himself, Rashad began to worry. Perhaps she'd changed her mind and wasn't coming after all. Perhaps this would be the first time Rashad wouldn't get what he wanted. It was a sobering thought, and one he quickly dismissed — whether Nina came or not, he could still salvage his deal somehow.

CHAPTER 4

NINA

The morning was quickly turning into a disaster.

First, Nina had woken to a message from Rashad, telling her to plan for a weekend of sailing. Nina knew instantly that she wouldn't be able to leave her kids that long, nor did she want to. Worse, there was a text from Amanda as well.

Nina, I'm so sorry, but I seem to have the stomach flu. I don't think I can watch Kate and Miles this weekend.

Nina replied to her babysitter that it was fine, and she should take it easy, but the text created another wave of panic. Now, Nina couldn't even spend the day in a meeting with Rashad unless she found a new babysitter immediately. She made a few calls to babysitters she'd worked with in the past, but no one had time on such short notice. Nina's mom, Amy, lived an hour away, but she was out of town for the weekend with friends, so Nina couldn't call her. She wasn't about to leave her kids with an untrusted babysitter, not for a whole weekend, so she was going to have to cancel with Rashad.

"Mommy?"

Nina looked up from her phone to see Miles standing in the doorway. He was wearing his dinosaur pajamas and held his favorite stuffed rabbit by the ear in one hand. His blond hair was tousled and his blue eyes were still heavy.

"Hi, honey." Nina had barely registered that she was still in her own pajamas in bed — she'd been so worried about sorting out the babysitter situation that she hadn't even got dressed yet.

"What are we doing today?" Miles crossed the room and climbed into bed with her. He snuggled up against her, resting his downy head on her shoulder. Nina breathed in his distinctive shampoo-and-cornflakes smell.

"I'm not sure yet," Nina said honestly. "Is your sister awake?"

"No, Kate's sleeping." Miles yawned. "Is 'Manda coming to watch us?"

"Not today."

"Oh, good." Miles looked up at Nina and beamed. "I like you home."

“Me, too.” Nina’s heart melted. She wasn’t sure what she’d been thinking, giving up a Saturday with her kids. Yet the problem of what to do about Rashad loomed. She still needed to deal with him. “What do you want to do today?”

“Adventure,” Miles said. He’d recently seen a children’s show in which the characters were always going off on adventures, and it had become his favorite word ever since.

“Adventure, huh?” An idea occurred to Nina, although she wasn’t sure it was a good one. “What about a sailing adventure?”

“Yeah!” Miles’s eyes gleamed. “I like boats.”

“Me too.” The idea began to form more clearly. Certainly, a yacht like Rashad’s would have numerous staff who could keep an eye on Miles and Kate while Nina and Rashad talked business. With any luck, Nina would be able to get the twins onboard and happily occupied with wave watching and coloring books before he even noticed they were there. Then, after the meeting, Nina and her kids could enjoy a lovely afternoon of sailing, which Kate and Miles would love.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Perhaps it wasn't wise to bring two young stowaways to a business meeting, but Nina couldn't bring herself to feel guilty. Rashad clearly had ulterior motives for this meeting — namely malicious motives against Nina's company. She could have her own ulterior motive: giving her kids a nice day at sea.

"Where's the boat?" Miles asked, bouncing a little now. His sleepiness seemed to have dissipated.

"My friend has one," Nina said. It wasn't the truth exactly, but it was close enough. "How about you go and wake Kate up? I'll be there in just a minute."

"Okay!" Miles bounced off the bed and dashed away to wake Kate.

Nina rolled out of bed and hurried into the shower, hoping to get clean and dressed before the twins got up to too much mischief. She felt good about her plan — all the way up until she remembered how difficult it always was getting Kate and Miles ready to do anything.

"Kate got more blueberries," Miles whined, staring into his sister's bowl of oatmeal.

"I want toast," Kate put in, her mouth contorted into an exaggerated frown.

"Everyone is getting oatmeal," Nina said as gently as she could. "Miles, I gave you each ten blueberries. Remember? We counted together. Now, we need to be out the door in a few minutes, so eat up and let's go."

Kate looked down at her oatmeal with such a deep sadness that she looked more like

a seventy-three-year-old wondering where her life had gone than a three-year-old contemplating her breakfast, but she took an obligatory spoonful. Meanwhile, Nina ran upstairs to throw together a few changes of clothes each for her and the kids, some swimsuits, and some entertainment for the twins. When she got back downstairs, Miles had a purple streak across his forehead and Kate was laughing like she'd just seen the funniest movie ever.

"Oh, Miles, did you put another blueberry on your head?" Nina asked.

"Yeah!" Kate laughed. "It was so funny, Mommy!"

"I bet. Come on, Miles, let's get you cleaned up."

By the time they were all ready to go, it was already almost eleven. Nina barely had time to run a comb through her hair and grab a few last-minute things before rushing them all out the door. In the car, Miles and Kate sang along to their tape of children's songs, the breakfast pandemonium seemingly forgotten, but Nina still felt flustered.

She liked to arrive for her business meetings prepared, having read about the people she was meeting with, taken her time getting dressed, and arriving early so that she could take a quiet moment before the meeting began. Instead, she found herself pulling into the marina's parking lot almost fifteen minutes late, disheveled, with two preschoolers in tow and no time to prepare.

"Come on, guys." Nina unbuckled Kate and Miles from their car seats and slung the bags she'd packed over her shoulders, feeling more like a camel than a businesswoman. Then she took a child's hand in each of hers and began walking them all towards the dock.

"Now, when we're on board, I'll need to do a little work," Nina explained. "I'll find someone nice to keep an eye on you, but I'll need you to be quiet and well-behaved."

After I'm done with work, we can play together and have a nice afternoon. Okay?"

"Okay, Mommy," Kate and Miles chorused. Nina wasn't as comforted by their quick agreement as she might have liked to be. Her children were the lights of her life, but perfectly well-behaved angels they were not.

It took Nina several more minutes to find the dock where Rashad's yacht was moored. She hurried her kids along, hoping against hope that Rashad would be busy somewhere and that she could find a place for her kids to wait and someone friendly to watch them before he started asking questions.

"Nina?"

Nina's heart sank as she raised her gaze. Of course. Rashad was standing on the yacht's balcony, looking down at her with a bemused expression. He held a glass of golden liquid in one hand and wore shorts and a button-down shirt. He looked every inch the relaxed millionaire, which was the complete opposite of how Nina felt.

"Hi." Nina let go of her children's hands, smoothed her hair behind her ear, and raised a hand to Rashad in greeting. "Sorry, I was running a little late."

"Right. And you decided to bring a few extra guests?" Rashad looked meaningfully at Kate and Miles. As if on cue, the kids waved.

"Hi, Mommy's friend!" Miles called. Kate, a little shier than her brother, stayed quiet, but she waved too.

"Hi, children." The bemused expression grew. "Just a moment. I'll come down and we can... discuss... how to proceed."

Nina's heart sank again. If Rashad told her that they couldn't have a business meeting

with her kids on board — which, she could admit, would be a fairly reasonable request — she wasn't sure what she'd do. The best-case scenario would be returning home with her kids and trying to find a babysitter for the next day, which wouldn't be easy.

A moment later, Rashad was on their level. He beckoned Nina and the kids across the gangplank and onto the lowest deck. Nina held a little extra firmly on to both her twins' hands, knowing that the yacht probably looked like a giant playground to the rambunctious three-year-olds.

"Nina." Rashad strode towards them, his arms spread. He'd put the drink down somewhere, but he still looked like he was on vacation. "Thank you for coming to meet me."

"The pleasure's mine." Nina nodded in lieu of a handshake, the twins' hands still in hers.

"I have to ask, though, if we might have had a bit of a misunderstanding. I imagined you'd come alone."

"As did I." Nina smiled self-consciously. "Unfortunately, the babysitter canceled last-minute, and I wasn't sure we'd get another opportunity to meet."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Right.” Rashad still looked far from convinced.

“Rashad Al-Zayed, these are my children, Miles and Kate Kendrick.”

“Hello.” Rashad looked down at the kids, then held out a hand to shake. Miles quickly gave him a sideways high five, while Kate hugged one of Nina’s legs.

“We haven’t exactly covered handshake etiquette,” Nina admitted.

“I can see that.” But there was a hint of a smile behind Rashad’s bemused expression. He straightened up. “I’m not really sure how to proceed.”

“We can have our meeting,” Nina said, with more confidence than she felt. “If you have someone who can look after Miles and Kate for a few minutes, it should be fine. They’re very well-behaved.” Miles took that moment to let go of Nina’s hand and run to the railing, where he promptly stuck his head through the top and middle rails.

“I don’t have anyone who can watch them,” Rashad replied. “The yacht is staffed by a skeleton crew, and they’re all needed for sailing.”

“Please, Mommy’s friend,” Kate said suddenly, looking up at Rashad with big blue eyes. “We like boats.”

Rashad hesitated, then sighed. “All right. It’s unorthodox, but we can give it a try. I’ll tell the crew to get us on the water. Nina, please make your way to the first floor — there’s a meeting room set up.”

“Thank you.” Nina wished she didn’t feel indebted to Rashad so early in what would surely be a difficult process.

“All right.” Rashad didn’t seem sure how to react to her gratitude. He hesitated as if there was more he wanted to say, then abruptly turned and headed towards the back of the ship. Nina squeezed Kate’s hand and called Miles back over. For better or for worse, they were on the way now — Nina, her staunch business rival, and her three-year-old twins. What could go wrong?

CHAPTER 5

RASHAD

Rashad was already regretting this. Seeing Nina with her kids had been a surprise. More than a surprise. Usually, he handled unexpected obstacles well, but those obstacles were typically a problem with a flight route, a new piece of leverage, or a change in stock prices — not a pair of adorable twins.

Rashad didn’t even know anything about children. Nina’s kids seemed to be, well, old enough to stand and talk. They probably weren’t babies, then. Yet Rashad knew nothing else about them. Did they need diapers? Wi-Fi access? Colorful blocks? A space to do their math homework? He had no idea.

Rashad took a deep breath. He didn’t need to know anything about kids. They could play — or read, or sleep? Rashad wasn’t sure — while he and Nina had their meeting. After that, they could enjoy the ship for the weekend before returning to San Diego. After all, Rashad was about to put their mother out of business. A weekend on a yacht seemed like a nice gesture in those circumstances.

Plus, if he and Nina didn’t meet now, he wasn’t sure when they could. He needed to return to Al Soub by Tuesday at the latest, ideally with a strategy hammered out. It

was definitely less than ideal to have a meeting with a pair of children in the room, but Rashad had held meetings in unfavorable circumstances before — during a flood in Australia, for instance, or through a translator in Greece. Surely, a pair of young kids couldn't be more difficult to handle than either of those things.

Rashad had a quick word with his captain, a middle-aged woman who he'd worked with for several years now. Then he returned to the meeting room, where Nina was sitting at the table with a folder in front of her. Under the table, the two children, Miles and Kate, were giggling quietly. When Rashad entered, Miles let out an excited shriek and bounced, making the table shake slightly.

"Shall we begin?" Rashad took a seat across from Nina and opened his own folder, just as a loud and enthusiastic chorus of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" emerged from underneath the table.

"Let's color quietly for a few minutes," Nina said, her tone firm yet gentle as she leaned under the table. There were a few disgruntled mutters, but the children fell silent.

"Are they really comfortable under the table?" Rashad asked.

"Yes, very. I offered them a seat at the table, but they refused to budge once they got settled."

"As long as they're comfortable." Rashad folded his hands.

"My thoughts exactly. Anyway, my apologies again for our unexpected attendees."

"It's really all right." Rashad took out a few sheets of numbers he'd been preparing for the meeting. "I am curious, though, about why you weren't able to find someone to watch them."

“Babysitters are hard to come by, especially good ones.” Nina shrugged. “I have a few regulars, but it ended up being last-minute, and my mother was away for the weekend.”

“Don’t you have other family in the area who could look after them? Your husband, maybe?”

Nina looked away and Rashad instantly felt guilty for his question. He, of all people, should know that family could be a touchy subject and that she might not want to discuss hers with him. The question about her husband was particularly out of line, especially since Rashad was interested in her answer from a personal angle as well as a professional one. Was Nina married? With two young kids, the odds pointed to yes.

“It’s just us,” Nina said. “I’m not married.” She lifted her eyes to Rashad’s. “But I think we’re here to discuss business, not our personal lives. Am I right?”

“Of course.” Rashad slid his first sheet of figures across the table to Nina, trying to ignore the way his heart stirred at the knowledge that she was single. “I have a few data points I’d like your opinion on. The research I’ve been able to do shows that your company, Heartbeat, already reaches a significant portion of likely users, particularly in the eighteen-to-thirty-five category. Would you agree with these figures?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Nina glanced over the sheet. “Yes, although I think some important data is missing. While we have a lot of young users, we also have a decent share of elderly users, particularly for an app.”

“Great. I ask because—” The boat jolted a little as it slid out of the mooring, and Nina stiffened. “It’s all right. We’re just getting out of the harbor.”

“I’ll admit, I haven’t been on many boats before.” Nina grinned sheepishly. “Running a business and looking after two children doesn’t leave a lot of time for boating.”

“You can say that again. I don’t have children, and I still work so much that I haven’t even been out on this yacht myself since I bought it. Mostly, I offer it to friends or clients.”

“I wondered why you had a yacht moored in San Diego when it doesn’t seem that you have much business here.” Nina spread her hands on the table. “All right, please continue.”

“Mommy!” One of the little blond children, Kate, poked her head out from under the table. “Miles stole the red crayon, and he won’t give it back!”

“Just a moment.” Nina shot Rashad an apologetic look before disappearing under the table. He heard her slightly muffled voice. “Kate, you have your own box of crayons. Use your red.”

“It isn’t the same,” Kate said in a pouty voice.

“If you’d like to borrow Miles’s crayon, I’m sure he’ll lend it to you when he’s finished, if you ask politely.”

There was a long pause, then a child’s voice said, “Miles? Can I use the red?”

“Just a minute.” There was the sound of scribbling. “Here you go.”

“Thanks!”

Nina reappeared, smoothing her hair as she regained her seat. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. Are all children their age so well-behaved?”

Nina smiled. “Thanks for saying that. They have their moments of good behavior, like all kids do, but I have to admit that you’ll probably see them having a streak of mischief sooner or later.”

“I’ll look forward to that. So, about these numbers...”

Just then, Miles rolled out from under the table and climbed onto the top, using one of the chairs as leverage. “Look, Mommy! We’re going out to sea!”

“Miles, honey, we don’t climb on tables.” Nina gently removed her son from the surface. “But you’re right, we’re leaving the harbor.”

“Wow!” Miles flopped onto his mother’s lap and turned to Rashad. “Do you live here, mister?”

Rashad smiled despite the inconvenience and disruption. “No, I don’t. I just visit sometimes.”

“But it’s your boat?”

“It is.”

“I wish I can live here,” Miles said. He leaned back and gazed up at Nina. “Can we live here?”

“No, honey, but we can have a nice visit today.”

“Mommy!” Kate appeared, red crayon still in her hand. “I’m hungry.”

“Shall I get you an applesauce pouch?” Nina asked. She sent a glance towards Rashad. “Really, I am sorry. I think they’re both excited by the new experience.”

“It’s all right.” Rashad glanced at his watch. “Maybe we can start with lunch and resume our meeting afterwards.”

“That would be great.”

So, with absolutely no business concluded, the foursome headed onto the top deck to watch San Diego slowly disappearing into the distance as they dined. Rashad had planned a menu of freshly caught seafood and salad. He half expected the twins to turn their noses up at the dishes, but either he was wrong about kids, or they were more adventurous eaters than most, because both children dug into the feast with enthusiasm.

“Is this your first time in San Diego?” Nina asked as she handed her son a bite of bread.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Rashad hesitated before answering. Usually, he didn't engage in small talk with his rivals. He preferred to get right down to business. It wouldn't hurt to chat a little over lunch, though. Surely.

"No. I went to college in Los Angeles, so I visited San Diego two or three times while I was there."

"Really? LA is a great town. If you like traffic and palm trees." Nina winked and Rashad smiled.

"Well, I do. The city reminded me of my country, Al Soub."

"I've heard of Al Soub. Your father is the sheikh there, right? And your brother will rule after him."

"That's correct." Rashad had the unsettling feeling that Nina had been looking into him — though ofcourseshe would have. She was a smart businesswoman and wouldn't have gone into this meeting without some knowledge of who she was dealing with.

"Do you spend much time there?"

"Yes, I live most of the year in the capital, though I travel frequently for business."

"To Germany, most recently."

"Once again, correct." Rashad took a bite of fish. "You do your homework."

“I wouldn’t be successful if I didn’t.”

“Homework is important,” Kate piped up. “I always do my homework.”

“You have homework?” Rashad was surprised. He would have thought that kids her age were too young for formal education.

“Yeah.” Kate nodded importantly. “Miss Emily gives us homework.”

“Miss Emily is their preschool teacher,” Nina filled in. “They attend a nature preschool a few hours a day.”

“What kind of homework does she give you?” Rashad asked.

“Read books,” Miles joined in. “Collect leaves. Paint a picture.”

“That all sounds nice.”

“Yeah!” Miles nodded enthusiastically.

Rashad turned his gaze back to Nina and saw that she was looking a little pale. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” Nina nodded, though she half looked like she was trying to convince herself. “Just a bit dizzy.”

“If you haven’t spent much time on boats, you might be feeling seasick.” Rashad finished the last of his salad. “Usually, taking a little time to get acclimated does the trick.”

“I hope so.” Nina took a final sip of her water and leaned back. “At least the kids

seem all right.”

Miles and Kate had just finished the last bites of their food and were on their feet again by the railing, looking out over the sea below. They looked so small against the side of the yacht and so adorable.

“Kids are resilient,” Rashad said. That, at least, he was almost certain about. He didn’t need to spend a lot of time around children to know that. “Shall we have a quick tour of the yacht?”

“That would be lovely.” Nina got to her feet. “Kate, Miles, are you ready to look around?”

“Yeah!” The twins chorused enthusiastically. Rashad led the way from the dining area into the nearby sitting study.

“This is my office,” he told Nina.

“What a view.” She went to a window and looked out over the San Diego skyline that was slowly receding into the distance.

“I enjoy it. Come, I’ll show you the next room.” Rashad led the way through the sitting room, along the deck, to the small onboard hot tub and dipping pool, up to the kitchen and bedrooms, and through the observation deck on the back of the ship, where long blue couches offered gorgeous views of ocean and sky. Kate and Miles immediately leaped onto one of the couches, giggling joyfully, but Nina didn’t look as enthusiastic. In fact, she was leaning against the ship’s railing, looking even paler than before.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Are you feeling all right?” Rashad came to join her. He noticed that, even though she appeared not to be feeling well, she kept most of her attention on her kids all the time. It must be tiring, being a parent.

“A little dizzy.” Nina made a face. “Sorry. Maybe it’s seasickness, maybe it’s lack of sleep, but either way, I have to admit that I’m not at my best.”

Rashad had a full afternoon of meetings scheduled. He’d planned to learn everything Nina would tell him about her company, then make her an offer — one way or another. By the time the sun set, he’d been hoping to toast to his success with a glass of champagne.

Things didn’t seem to be going that way, though. Nina was clearly not feeling that well, and even if she were in full form, the kids were here and didn’t seem eager to sit quietly while Rashad and Nina hashed out the basics of a business deal.

“How about this,” Rashad said slowly. “This afternoon, I have a bit of work I was hoping to do. Perhaps you and the twins can enjoy the yacht and rest a little. We can reconvene for dinner, and tomorrow we can have our meetings.”

“Really?” Nina frowned. “I don’t want to throw off your schedule.”

“It’s fine.” Rashad always had other work he could do, and there was no point pushing now. It would be easier to do what he had to do tomorrow. “Plus, I think the kids would enjoy an afternoon of playing instead of sitting in on boring business meetings.”

“I’m sure they would.” Nina still looked skeptical. “I just... Well. Thank you.”

“Of course. You know where everything is, so feel free to use the pool, help yourself to food from the kitchen, whatever you’d like. We can have dinner around seven.”

“Perfect. Thanks again.” Nina took a seat on one of the blue couches, resting her head on her hand, and Rashad slowly backed away. He had a strange urge to offer to babysit Miles and Kate so that Nina could rest, but he dismissed the thought before it could properly form. He didn’t know anything about children, and Nina seemed all right. Plus, he really did have work to do.

Rashad climbed the stairs to his office, where he opened his laptop and got to work. Usually, he would be completely absorbed in his job, but today he was distracted by the sound of giggles and voices downstairs. In the mid-afternoon, he spotted the kids playing in the pool while Nina sat on the edge, her skirt lifted over her knees, her feet in the water. She still looked tired, but she seemed all right. Hopefully, her seasickness was passing, and she’d be ready to get down to business soon.

Hopefully Rashad would be, too.

When seven o’clock rolled around, he met the trio back in the dining area for a simple dinner of pasta and salad. Again, the twins ate enthusiastically, but this time, Nina barely picked at her food. She drank plenty of water but didn’t seem hungry.

Rashad wanted to ask how she was, but he could barely get a word in edgewise. Kate and Miles were excitedly telling each other, Rashad, and Nina all about their day on the yacht — apparently, they’d swum, colored, played I Spy, and even watched an episode of their favorite TV show on the deck. From the way they described their day, it seemed like they’d had as much fun as they would have on Christmas. Rashad was glad that he’d given everyone the afternoon off so that the kids could have fun. Tomorrow, he and Nina would have to discuss business, and Rashad would do his

best to forget that she was a caring mother with adorable children and approach her simply as another enemy in business.

It might be harder than usual.

A few times, as the twins chattered and compared stories from their exciting day of yachting, Nina and Rashad's eyes met and they shared a smile at the children's antics. It was surprisingly fun to be one of two adults in the room, as though he and Nina were sharing an ongoing private joke. When little Kate announced that she was interested in being a veterinarian when she grew up, but only for octopuses, both Rashad and Nina fought to hide their smiles and had to look away.

Rashad wondered, for a fleeting moment, what he had wanted to be when he grew up, but he couldn't remember. He'd never wanted to be a sheikh, as he'd always known that was his brother's path, not his, but he wasn't sure what he'd aspired to become. Perhaps a vet, like Kate. Or perhaps a soccer player, like Miles. Business hadn't appealed to him until he was a teenager.

After dinner, Nina yawned.

"I think we'll go to bed. Thank you again for the afternoon. Miles and Kate had a great time."

"Yeah, thanks!" Miles gave a cute thumbs-up.

"No problem. Sleep well, and I hope you feel better in the morning."

"I'm sure I will." Nina smiled. "See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow."

Nina disappeared upstairs while Rashad poured himself a glass of wine. He leaned back in his chair and sipped deeply. This weekend wasn't going the way he'd planned at all. By now, he should have had at least a handshake agreement with Nina on a takeover, or a strategy for outcompeting her company on the market. Instead, he'd gotten unrelated work done and joined Nina and her kids for two surprisingly pleasant meals.

Hopefully, Nina would feel better the next morning, and Rashad could put today out of his mind and get back to business. It might be harder than expected to be as ruthless as he wanted to be, now that he'd seen her with her kids, but he could overcome any hesitations he had.

He had to, or his company would suffer.

CHAPTER 6

NINA

The suite Rashad had prepared for Nina was beautiful. She'd caught a glimpse of it earlier in the day, during the tour, but it looked even nicer now that she was feeling tired and dizzy. The large bed, made with crisp white sheets and bracketed by gauzy curtains, was especially appealing. Nina had pushed hard to enjoy her afternoon with the twins despite feeling unwell, but now all she wanted to do was sink into that soft white bed for a nice long rest. In the morning, she'd feel better. She had to.

Apart from the bed, the room was furnished with a mahogany writing desk and a wardrobe, as well as a small seating area with a couch and an armchair. The room's picture window looked out over the now dark ocean and starry sky, with the lights of coastal cities flashing in the far distance. Kate and Miles immediately jumped onto the bed and began to roll around, giggling.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“All right, little monkeys.” Nina held out her arms and her twins leaped into them. “It’s time to start winding down for bed.”

“I’m not sleepy,” Miles protested.

“Me neither!”

Of course, Nina’s twins were in complete agreement when it came to bedtime — specifically, that neither of them liked it.

“I know, but if you get your teeth brushed and pajamas on, we can watch a little Paw Patrol in bed.”

Suddenly bouncing with excitement about toothbrushing and pajama-wearing, the twins hurried into the attached bathroom. Nina handed them their toothbrushes, then sat on the edge of the bathtub. She generally tried not to allow too much screen time, but an occasional episode of their favorite show was relaxing for everyone, Nina included.

While the twins brushed their teeth, Nina found her mind wandering to Rashad. He wasn’t quite what she’d expected. She’d arrived this morning ready to deal with a cutthroat businessman — and Rashad certainly was that. But he had also been considerate about the twins coming onboard, and willing to delay their meetings when he’d learned that Nina wasn’t feeling well. And he was still unbelievably attractive, even more so now that he was allowing himself to let his hard persona slide a little. Exchanging glances with him over dinner had made her heart flutter.

Nina knew that she couldn't let her guard down, though. Rashad might be slightly kinder than she'd expected, but he was still planning to undercut her business in one way or another. She'd need to be on top of her game for their meeting tomorrow. Perhaps a few more episodes of Paw Patrol and some snacks would help the twins stay out of their way for the meeting.

Once Miles and Kate were ready for bed, Nina got the twins tucked in with an episode of their show. They'd spent the day playing, coloring, and swimming, so surely a little screen time now wouldn't hurt. It was time for Nina's screen time, too. She got out her laptop and spent fifteen minutes looking at documents and figures she might need for the next day's meeting. She'd have liked more time, but exhaustion hit, and she closed the laptop before getting into bed with her twins. They snuggled in on either side, smelling like shampoo and the sweet scent of childhood. Without meaning to, Nina found her eyes growing heavy, and soon she was asleep.

"Mommy." A small hand poked Nina in the ribs as a sweet, high-pitched voice repeated the word, louder this time. "Mommy!"

"Yes, honey?" Nina rolled onto her side, blinking against the bright light. Kate and Miles were sitting on either side of her, still in their pajamas with bedheads and huge smiles.

"Can we watch more Paw Patrol?" Miles asked, bouncing slightly.

"Not right now, honey. We watched an episode just last night. How about you get dressed and use the bathroom? Then we can see about breakfast."

Kate and Miles scampered towards the bathroom, and Nina pushed herself into a seated position. Immediately, her head began to spin, which was a bad sign. She had no idea how she was going to have her wits about her for the meeting with Rashad when she couldn't even sit upright without feeling like she was going to keel over.

Her dizziness and exhaustion were extremely frustrating. Nina never got sick, despite her hectic schedule of working and raising two preschoolers. Now she was sick, inarguably so, and it had come at the worst possible time. She was stuck on a boat with her two kids and her business rival, no babysitters or helpful neighbors in sight. Speaking of babysitters, perhaps she had the same illness as Amanda, whatever that was — or perhaps she was just seasick, as Rashad had suggested. Either way, her being under the weather was going to make things much harder.

Taking a deep breath, Nina pushed herself out of bed and teetered on her feet as another wave of dizziness hit her, this time accompanied by weakness. She picked her way to her suitcase, where she pulled out an outfit for each of her kids and something to wear herself — a simple skirt and top. When Kate and Miles came barreling back out of the bathroom, she handed them their outfits and went in to take a quick shower and get dressed.

“We’re hungry,” Miles announced when she reemerged. Miles often fell into the role of spokesman for both twins, especially when Kate was feeling tired or shy.

“I know, honey. Let’s find some breakfast.” Nina held out her hands automatically and the twins took them. Together, they walked out of the suite and down the hall towards the kitchen and dining area. Nina felt a little more alive after her warm shower, but she was still dragging.

“Are we going to swim again today?” Miles asked. “And watch Paw Patrol?”

“I’m sure we’ll have time for both.” Although whether Nina would be able to stay upright long enough to monitor her kids in the pool was another question entirely.

“Are you okay, Mommy?” Kate asked. She looked up at her mother, her blue eyes wide and her small brow furrowed.

“Yes, honey, don’t worry. I’m just a little tired.”

“Maybe you need some coffee,” Kate suggested, her sweet voice excited. Nina chuckled at the suggestion.

“You know me so well, don’t you, Katie Pie?”

“Yes, Mommy.” Kate beamed.

The table where they’d had dinner yesterday was set with cereal and fruit, along with several bowls and a note from Rashad asking Nina to meet him around nine a.m. A glance at her watch showed they had about twenty minutes for breakfast before then. Hopefully, a little coffee and some food would help Nina feel well enough to go to the meeting.

The kids ate bowls of cereal with sliced bananas while Nina drank a cup of coffee and nibbled on an apple. When they were finished, she brought them to the meeting room, where Rashad was waiting. He closed his laptop when Nina entered with the twins.

“Good morning. How did you all sleep?”

“Good!” Miles said.

Nina smiled. “Well, thank you. I’ll get the twins set up with some coloring over here, and we can get started.” She’d save Paw Patrol for emergencies. Nina led her kids to a smaller table in the corner, where they got seated as she handed out coloring books, crayons, and headphones with their audiobook player. As she bent down to give Miles his coloring book, Nina’s head spun and she had to brace herself against the table.

“Are you all right?” Rashad asked from behind her. Nina straightened slowly.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“I’m fine, thank you.” After checking to make sure Kate and Miles had everything they needed, she crossed to Rashad’s table and sat across from him. Her head was still spinning.

“Are you sure?” Rashad leaned closer. “I hope you won’t be offended by me saying this, but you look a little pale.”

“I’ll be all right.” Nina tried a smile. “I think I’m just tired. Running a business and taking care of kids isn’t as easy as you might think.”

“I can imagine. If you’re sure you’re all right, we can begin.” Rashad slid the folder he’d had yesterday across the table to Nina. “If you need a break at any time, just let me know.”

“I will. Thanks.” Nina took the folder and began flipping through the documents. Apart from the research he’d mentioned yesterday on customer demographics, Rashad had information on her employees, her company’s history — even an approximation of her profits. Nina did her best to focus. Rashad had a lot of ammunition, and she couldn’t let her dizziness slow her down.

“All right. If you can tell me what your profits were last year, that would be a great start. I have an approximation here, but it’s hard to calculate since you aren’t publicly traded.”

Nina scoffed. “Right, like I’m just going to hand you that kind of information. How about we start with your company, and what you seek to gain from this meeting?” Nina looked down at the figures. “I see here that you’ve written, um...”

“Are you all right?” Rashad asked again.

“Yes...” The words seemed to dance across the page in front of her, little black specks in a conga line instead of useful information.

“Nina.” Rashad’s voice was gentler now, and she felt a hand on her forearm, warm and firm. “It’s clear that you aren’t. How about you go back to bed for a little while? If you’re just tired, that should fix things.”

“I need to watch Miles and Kate,” Nina said. The table looked so comfortable that she half wanted to lay her head down, just for a moment. She felt herself sway a little.

“I’ll look after them,” Rashad said. That jolted Nina out of her exhaustion. She was not going to let a professional nemesis look after her babies.

“It’s really fine. I’ll just have some water and I’ll be okay.”

But Kate and Miles must have overheard the conversation, because they slid out of their chairs and came over to join them.

“Mommy’s friend is gonna watch us?” Miles asked. He turned to Rashad and looked up at him with wide blue eyes. “Can we drive the boat?”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.” Rashad smiled down at Miles. He appeared sincere, but that wasn’t enough for Nina to leave her kids with him. He hardly seemed like the kind of guy who’d spent a lot of time babysitting nieces and nephews or volunteering at the local preschool. There was every chance that he knew nothing about kids and had no idea what he was signing up for.

“Cool,” Kate said in a low voice. “I want to drive the boat, too.”

“We can all take a turn.” Rashad smiled at Kate then looked up at Nina. “Please, take an hour or two to rest. The three of us will be fine.”

“I really couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t ask. I’m offering.”

Nina hesitated. She didn’t want to feel like she owed Rashad anything, nor did she want to leave the twins with an inexperienced babysitter. Yet she also felt so dizzy she wasn’t sure she could stand, and a pounding headache had joined the fray. Nina was in no condition to hold a business meeting or even play with the twins until she had a little more sleep and some fluids.

“It’s okay, Mommy,” Kate said, taking Nina’s hand. “You can drive the boat later.”

Nina and Rashad’s eyes met, and they shared a smile, then Nina sighed.

“Okay. If you’re sure. But I’ll only sleep for an hour, and if you need anything at all, just come and wake me up.”

“I will, but I won’t.” Rashad urged her to her feet and towards the hallway that led back to her room.

“Kate doesn’t like food that isn’t the right temperature,” Nina said, already feeling groggy. “Like warm ice cream or cold French fries.”

“No one likes warm ice cream or cold French fries.” Rashad and the twins led Nina towards her room. “It’ll be okay.”

“And Miles will say that he’s had enough water, but he doesn’t always remember to drink,” Nina continued.

“I drink,” Miles said, his tone offended.

“I know, honey, just not always enough.” They arrived outside the rooms Nina had shared with the twins the night before, and Rashad opened the door. “If you have any questions?—”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“I’ll come straight to you. I promise.” Rashad smiled, not the slippery, ulterior-motive smile he’d worn at the event where they’d met or the nonplussed one he’d had when he’d first seen the twins, but a real smile. “Rest now.”

“All right.” Nina crawled into bed, barely able to savor the soft, fresh-smelling sheets or the way the boat rocked her gently before darkness enclosed her and she was asleep. Her last thought before slipping into dreamland was that she should have mentioned to Rashad not to play Uno, no matter how much the twins asked, unless he wanted a riot on his hands...

CHAPTER 7

RASHAD

Rashad looked down at Kate and Miles, who were smiling up at him with identical angelic expressions. They looked so similar, from their blue eyes to their carbon-copy freckles, that Rashad was glad they were different genders. Otherwise, he was sure he wouldn’t be able to tell them apart.

Miles blinked slowly, reminding Rashad of a cat sizing up its prey, and Rashad had a moment of nerves. What was he thinking, offering to watch a pair of twin preschoolers? He’d barely spent any time with children — if the time he’d kissed a baby during the opening of the Al Soub–UAE pipeline project didn’t count. He wasn’t sure what to do with them.

The better option might have been to turn around, but they were a full day’s sail from San Diego by now. It would take just as long to get back, and Nina might be feeling

better by then.

“Can we drive the boat now?” Miles asked.

“Sure. Let’s go.”

As though shot out of a cannon, the twins flew down the hallway and up the stairs. Surprisingly, they were going in exactly the correct direction, although Rashad had no idea how they knew where the bridge was. Perhaps they remembered from yesterday’s tour, although he’d only pointed then. Rashad followed at a light jog, worried about the mischief the kids might get up to if he left them alone too long.

The bridge was empty, with the course set and monitored remotely. Rashad opened the door, and the kids immediately ran towards the equipment.

“Hold on!” Rashad called. Luckily, the twins stopped in their tracks, looking guilty. “We don’t touch anything until I explain what it is,” he continued. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Miles said. Kate nodded, though her small face had fallen.

“Don’t worry, you haven’t done anything wrong,” Rashad assured the kids. “Now, who wants to steer the boat?”

Both twins immediately perked up and raised their hands. Rashad grinned and got them set up, with one on each side of the yacht’s large wheel, the captain’s chair boosting them to the correct height. He quietly pressed a button to lock the ship’s controls, then let the twins spend an enjoyable ten minutes pretending to steer the yacht. They didn’t seem to notice that the boat remained on a steady course no matter how much they pulled on the wheel.

“Look, a pirate ship!” Miles called, pulling the wheel to the left.

“Let’s see if they have treasure!” Kate lifted onto her tiptoes to see through the windscreen. “Maybe some gold and chocolate coins!”

“Oh no, a sea monster!”

“That’s okay, it’s a friendly one.”

Rashad enjoyed watching the kids interact. It was clear that they were both very imaginative children who loved each other deeply. Nina must be an excellent mother, which was doubly impressive since she was running a business at the same time. Rashad certainly wouldn’t have time to raise kids while running his business.

“What’s next?” Miles asked after a few more minutes of play. He and Kate turned to Rashad with expectant expressions.

“What’s next?” Rashad echoed.

“Yeah. Can we watch Paw Patrol? Or go swimming? Or play Uno?”

“Let’s play Uno.” The twins gave him matching Cheshire Cat grins again.

Rashad wasn’t sure what Paw Patrol was, didn’t feel confident supervising swimming three-year-olds, and didn’t have a deck of Uno cards on the boat, so he scanned his brain for another activity. What had he enjoyed doing as a child?

“How about we color?” he suggested.

“Okay,” Kate hopped off the chair she’d been standing on and took Rashad’s hands. She looked up at him with wide, innocent blue eyes. “I like coloring. Do you like

coloring?”

“I sure do.” Rashad led them back to the meeting room, where their coloring things were still set up on the smaller table. “Grab whatever you’d like. We can go color on the deck.”

The twins filled their arms with coloring books, crayons, and markers, then followed Rashad onto the on-deck seating area. Kate flung herself onto her stomach on a couch, her coloringbook in front of her, while Miles flopped cross-legged on the floor and opened his book on his lap.

“Here.” Kate handed Rashad a page from her coloring book. “You can color the panda princess.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Oh.” Rashad blinked at the page, which did indeed show a panda dressed in a beautiful princess gown with a high collar and intricate embroidery. “Thank you.”

He spent several minutes shading in the princess, and when he looked up, he saw that Miles had colored all down his little arm with a blue marker. Rashad’s eyes widened as he began to worry about chemicals in the marker liquid.

“Oh, no, Miles; we should wash that off.”

“Mommy lets us color on our arms,” Miles said, though he wore a guilty expression that undermined his confident statement.

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“What does si-cerely mean?” Miles asked.

“It means honestly.”

“Oh.” Miles looked down at his arms. “I guess I wasn’t being si-cerely.”

Rashad almost laughed at the adorable phrase but held back. “All right. Come on, Miles. Let’s get you washed up.”

“All right.”

“Kate, come with us.”

“I can stay here and color.” Kate stuck out her lip. Rashad knew he was probably being silly, but it seemed important that they stay together.

“No, we’ll all go. Come on.” They walked to the bathroom, where Rashad helped Miles wash his hands and arm. Then they returned to the deck, and Kate looked up at him with those big blue eyes.

“I’m hungry.”

“You had breakfast ninety minutes ago.”

“Yeah,” Miles chimed in. “It’s snack time. I like blub-blub crackers.”

“What are blub-blub crackers?” Rashad asked.

“You know, blub-blub.” Miles made a fish face and mimed swimming with his arms.

“Oh, goldfish crackers. I’m not sure if I have them. Let’s check in the kitchen.”

Rashad didn’t have goldfish crackers, but within a few minutes he got the twins set up with a clementine each and several rosemary crackers to share. He sat across from them while they ate, already feeling tired. A glance at his watch showed that he’d only been looking after the kids on his own for about an hour, yet he was already out of ideas for how to entertain them. Rashad’s respect for parents, especially single parents like Nina, was growing by the minute.

The rest of the morning passed in several more snacks, a game of Red Light, Green Light on the main deck, more coloring, and a dramatic reading of several of the picture books the kids had brought. Despite his tiredness, Rashad found that he was enjoying spending time with the twins. They were sincere and playful in a way that adults just weren’t.

A little after twelve, when he was trying to decide what to do about lunch, Rashad heard footsteps in the hall behind him. He looked up from the panda princess he was coloring (the kids had been through a half dozen pictures each, but he wanted to do his best work on his coloring) and spotted Nina in the doorway, smiling at him and the twins.

“Hey,” she said. She looked much better than before — most of the color had returned to her cheeks, and she was smiling. She had pulled her hair back in a braid that hung over her shoulder and was dressed in a white blouse and a blue flared skirt that ended just below her knees.

“Mommy!” In unison, Kate and Miles threw down their crayons and ran to their mother. She scooped them into her arms, planting kisses on their small heads. With one twin balanced on each hip, she surveyed them.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Good!” Miles snuggled into her. “We drove the boat.”

“Wow, you drove the boat? That’s so cool!”

“Yeah, and we colored,” Kate added. “Your friend is nice.”

Rashad smiled at the little trio. It was clear that the twins loved their mother and that she felt the same way about them. As soon as they spotted Nina, both kids had lit up like a movie star had just walked into the room or their favorite cartoon character had come alive. Rashad didn’t remember if his relationship with his parents had ever been like that, though he suspected it hadn’t. He was glad that these kids would only ever experience love from their mother.

Rashad was going to have to forget how great a mother Nina was and how much her

kids relied on her before they sat down for their business meeting.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Thank you so very much for watching them.” Nina set the kids down and crossed to Rashad. “I really appreciate it, and I hope they weren’t too much trouble.”

“Not at all,” Rashad said, though he’d been outnumbered more than he wanted to admit. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, much better.” Nina smiled. “The rest was just what I needed. If you give me a few minutes to get the twins something to eat and settle them in with some entertainment, we can get down to business.”

Rashad should have been relieved to hear her say that. After all, getting down to business was the point of this whole trip. The sooner they could start working, the sooner he could make a plan and the sooner Nina would be gone from his life forever. Yet, strangely, the prospect of Nina and her kids disappearing wasn’t as appealing as it had been even a few hours ago.

Rashad hesitated, unsure of how to answer. He knew the right way forward: he should thank Nina for her suggestion and set up their meeting while she fed her kids. He should be what he always was — ruthless and goal-oriented, not stopping until he got what he wanted.

And yet, a part of him wasn’t sure that’s what he wanted anymore.

CHAPTER 8

NINA

Rashad was being strangely quiet. Nina had just returned from her nap, which had done wonders for her health — she must have been really exhausted. Now, she was ready to get to work, even if that meant an end to the pleasant vacation atmosphere she had been enjoying so far. Yet, for some reason, Rashad didn't seem as eager to get down to business as she did.

“Rashad?” Nina prompted.

“Sorry. I was just thinking that it doesn't really make sense to start work now. It's almost lunchtime. Let's have something to eat and see where we are.”

“All right, that sounds good to me.” Nina grinned. “I am feeling hungry.”

“Perfect.” Something sparkled behind Rashad's dark brown eyes, though Nina couldn't quite put her finger on the emotion. “I'm not sure how hungry Kate and Miles are, though. They had a lot of snacks this morning.”

“No, we didn't,” Miles said, looking up at Nina with plaintive blue eyes.

Nina chuckled. “Even if you did, it's still lunchtime and you can have more to eat if you feel hungry.”

“I hope I didn't give them too many snacks,” Rashad said as they climbed up to the dining area. “They seemed hungry, and I wasn't sure how much preschoolers eat.”

“Since they're little and growing, they need more snacks than we do,” Nina said. “I'm sure you did great. Um... you didn't play Uno, did you?”

“No. They asked about it, but I don't have a deck on board. Why?”

“No reason.” Nina tossed her braid over her shoulder. “I really appreciate you

watching them.”

“It was my pleasure, really. Now, I don’t have much staff here, so it’s on us to prepare lunch. I’ve set aside some pasta, fish, and vegetables if that works for you.”

“That would be great. I’ll help you cook.”

“You don’t have to. Rest, if you’re still feeling sick.”

“I’m much better now, really. Just tell me what you’d like me to do.”

“We’ll help too,” Kate put in.

“Can kids their age help with cooking?” Rashad asked. He looked skeptical.

“Sure, if we give them an age-appropriate job.”

Within a few minutes, they were all in the yacht’s spacious kitchen. Rashad prepared the fish while Nina worked on the pasta. Meanwhile, Miles snapped green beans, and Kate cut a zucchini with a safety knife.

“If you don’t have a chef onboard, does that mean you prepared the meal last night?” Nina asked as she tossed a handful of Miles’s green beans into a pan with a little oil.

“I did.”

“I’m impressed.” Nina glanced at him. “It was delicious.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“You sound surprised.” Rashad grinned at her, a more playful grin than Nina had seen from him before. “Is it because I’m a sheikh or because I’m a guy that you think I can’t cook?”

“Neither. Mostly I assumed you couldn’t cook because you’re a businessman,” Nina said. “Most of the CEOs and other executives I know employ chefs, because they feel their time is better spent working than cooking.”

“At home, I have a chef, too,” Rashad admitted. “But I try to cook for myself at least once or twice a week. I find it relaxing.” He laid the fish in his pan, where it sizzled and gave off a delicious scent.

“I like cooking, too,” Nina told him. “Before I had kids, it was a nice, relaxing activity for me. Now, it’s a little more stressful, since I know I need to have dinner on the table every day, so I tend to rely on simple, kid-friendly meals more than I used to.”

“That makes sense. It seems like your kids eat a lot of food that isn’t completely kid-friendly, though.”

“They’re good eaters.” Nina added the zucchini to the pan with a little salt. “It was important to me to make sure that my kids always try new foods, even if it was just a bite or two. It also helps when they do some cooking — they’re more likely to eat the food when they’ve been involved in the whole process. Miles, what’s your favorite food?”

“Sushi,” Miles said. He handed Nina the last green bean. “Can I go look at the waves

now?”

“Sure. Just stay where I can see you. Kate, how about you? What’s your favorite food?”

“I like mac and cheese.” Kate grinned a toothy grin. “And I like broccoli. Can I go with Miles?”

“Of course. You stay where I can see you, too.” Nina turned back to Rashad. “There are a few things that they still don’t like, but most things have turned out to be good.”

“I don’t think I was that adventurous at their age. When I was a kid, I loved nothing better than American fast food.”

“Really?” Nina added the pasta and sauce to the pan with the vegetables, along with some fresh basil, a few twists of pepper, and dried herbs. “Does Al Soub not have good food?”

“Actually, we have some of the best food in the world. Fresh seafood, delicious lamb dishes, great stewed rice, strong coffee with cream — even our salad, which is made with pomegranate seeds and oranges as well as fresh veggies, is very tasty. As a kid, it was hard to appreciate, though.”

“I guess that’s true for a lot of kids. When I was little, I always wished we could eat out, but as an adult, I miss the food my mom cooked for us. And my aunt. She was a wonderful chef, though I didn’t always recognize it back then.” Thinking about her aunt made Nina’s heart ache, so she quickly changed the subject. “It looks like lunch is almost ready.”

“You’re right.” Rashad used his spatula to cut the fish and serve it onto four plates, while Nina dished out the pasta. “Thanks for helping me cook.”

“It was my pleasure, and it was the least I could do after you watched my kids all morning.” They carried the plates to the dining area, while Rashad went back to the kitchen to get four glasses and a pitcher of water. Nina called Kate and Miles to the table and got them seated with the food. As Rashad joined them and everyone began to eat, Nina had the strange feeling that they must look like a family to a casual observer. They could easily have been two parents and two kids, all enjoying dinner together.

Nina quickly shook the feeling off. No matter what they looked like, she knew the truth, and she wasn’t about to get distracted.

“So, Nina, what’s your favorite thing to cook?” Rashad asked.

“Nowadays, make-your-own pizza is a hit,” Nina said. “I make some dough, and everyone can choose their own toppings.”

“I always put lots of olives,” Miles said, raising his eyebrows to punctuate “lots.”

“I used to enjoy making Chinese food, though,” Nina continued. “I still make some, but it’s a bit too time-consuming to do very often.”

“What kind of Chinese food?”

“Lots of things. I like to make fried rice, steamed buns, and some veggie dishes. I have a cookbook with lots of great recipes that are pretty authentic.”

“Recipes?” Rashad raised his eyebrows. “I’m surprised you use recipes instead of cooking by feel.”

“Do you cook by feel?” Nina raised her eyebrows back. “You seem like the kind of guy who likes to have things under his control. I would have imagined that you were

in the kitchen measuring each seasoning with a teaspoon and a level.”

“No way. Cooking is a time to let go and use your instincts.” Rashad took a sip of his water. “Following recipes limits your creativity.”

“Maybe, but when I follow a recipe, I always know that the final dish will taste good. No surprises.”

“No surprises.” Rashad shook his head. “That sounds like a sad way to live.”

Nina rolled her eyes. “If you had two kids and ran a business, I’m sure you’d feel the same way. Even now, do you really have a lot of surprises in your life?”

Rashad seemed to consider, then he raised his waterglass to Nina. “Perhaps not. Touché.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Plus, when you’re cooking for kids, you always want to know that the food will be nothing but net.” Nina mimed tossing a basketball through a hoop.

“I like basketball,” Miles announced. He and Kate had been eating quietly, but sensing a change of topic to sports, he jumped enthusiastically on the opportunity to participate.

“I like bunnies,” Kate countered, clearly not wanting to be left out. “I want seven bunnies.”

“Mommy, Kate can’t have seven bunnies, can she?”

“Mommy, can I please have seven bunnies?”

Nina smiled at her children. “Kate, seven bunnies would be a lot. How about, after lunch, you draw me a picture of the bunnies you’d like to have and tell me all about them? Then we can pretend that we already have seven bunnies.”

“I want sevenrealbunnies,” Kate said sadly.

“I know, and if I could wave a magic wand and get you seven bunnies, I would.”

“Okay. I’ll draw the bunnies now.” Kate kicked her small legs. “Can I be excused please?”

“Yes, honey. Take your plate to the kitchen and then you can start drawing the bunnies.”

“Miles, you come with me?”

“Yeah. Can I be excused?”

“Of course.”

The twins carried their plates to the kitchen while Rashad turned to Nina.

“Has she always wanted seven bunnies?”

“No, and she probably doesn’t even want seven bunnies now. She just likes the idea.” Nina shrugged. “She’ll forget about it by evening, or she won’t, in which case I’ll end up buying her seven toy bunnies for her next birthday. It’ll all work out.”

“It’s amazing how well you know them.”

“We do spend a lot of time together.” Nina finished the last of her food and got to her feet. “Can I take your plate for you? I should check on the kids anyway.”

“Thanks.”

In the kitchen, the twins were talking in low voices about where they might find cookies. Nina helped them put their plates in the small dishwasher and shooed them back onto the deck before she loaded her plate and Rashad’s. When she returned, the twins were back at the table and Rashad was showing them what looked like a large wooden game board.

“What’s this?” Nina leaned against the table to get a better view of the board.

“It’s a traditional Al Soubi game called Kish-Kish,” Rashad explained. “It’s been around for thousands of years — the oldest versions were found buried in a sunken

city off the coast. It's hard to know if we follow the same rules today as they did then, but it's still amazing to think about. Miles found this one on the bookshelf."

"Can we play?" Miles asked, bouncing in his chair. Nina opened her mouth to say that she was sorry but it was time for her and Rashad to get to work, but Rashad got there first. To her surprise, though, he agreed with Miles.

"Perhaps one round. Is that all right, Nina? We have plenty of time for our business later today."

Nina was more than happy to put off what was sure to be a high-stress meeting to have fun with the twins and Rashad, so she nodded.

"That's fine with me. How do we play?"

Rashad handed out four small bags of tokens. Upon closer inspection, Nina saw that each token was a smooth, marbled material and that they were printed with different symbols. Hershad small moons, while Rashad's had suns, Kate's had stars, and Miles's had clouds.

"The game is pretty simple," Rashad explained. "You're trying to get all your tokens home." He explained how to move, how a token could be sent back, and how to win. After a moment, Kate's eyes lit up.

"It's like Sorry!"

"I'm not familiar with that," Rashad said.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“She’s right —Sorry!Is a popular American game that has similar rules.” Nina explained a few differences between the games to the twins, then they began to play. Nina was a little worried that the game would be too complicated for her young kids, but they seemed to understand for the most part what they were supposed to do. Miles took great pleasure in sending everyone’s tokens back to the start, while Kate seemed mostly interested in singing little songs about each number she rolled. Nina was deeply unlucky and stayed at the back for most of the game.

Towards the end, Rashad rolled a five. Nina’s eyes widened as she saw that he could send Miles’s leading piece back to the start, guaranteeing that Rashad would win the game. Rashad was ruthless and self-centered; she knew that. She just hoped that Miles wouldn’t be too upset that he didn’t win.

Rashad reached for his piece, hesitated, then selected a different token. Instead of sending Miles’s piece to start, he harmlessly moved a faraway token. In the next round, Miles won the game and danced for joy across the deck, grinning broadly.

Nina met Rashad’s eyes across the table.

“Good game.”

“It was fun.” He began packing up the tokens. Nina knew that she shouldn’t read too much into Rashad’s actions. Just because he’d let a three-year-old win a game didn’t mean that he was any less of a cold, ruthless businessman than she’d thought. Yet perhaps there was another side to him, a kinder side. Maybe, as well as being a ruthless businessman, he was also a caring man who was kind to children and put off work to play a game.

“Can we play again?” Kate asked.

“Why not?” Rashad stopped packing up the game.

“Yay!”

This time, Kate won, with a little help from Rashad and Nina, and celebrated with her own joyful dance. Once the game was over, Miles begged to play Red Light, Green Light again, then Kate wanted a snack, then both twins wanted to have a freeze dance competition, and before any of them knew it, it was five o’clock — the kids’ usual dinnertime.

“I’m sorry,” Nina said. “We didn’t get any work done today. After the kids eat, I can get them ready for bed and we can get some work done.”

“Don’t worry about it. We still have all day tomorrow, and it was nice to take an afternoon off.”

“It was.” Nina met his dark brown eyes and smiled. To her surprise, it was true. She’d had a lovely afternoon with Rashad — and it had been nice to have a little help with the twins since she was still feeling a little under the weather. “Anyway, I’ll whip up some dinner for the little ones. We can eat later.”

“I’m happy to help.”

“No, it’s really all right. I’ll just make some sandwiches or something.”

“All right. I’ll check in on work, and we can meet up again once the twins are asleep.”

“Perfect.”

As Nina went into the kitchen to make carrot sticks and sandwiches (Kate and Miles weren't as excited to help this time and elected to color instead, Kate drawing her menagerie of bunnies), her thoughts kept drifting back to Rashad. He'd smiled while playing with Miles and Kate, real, genuine smiles, not the fake or unsettling kind she might have expected from a man like him. He really seemed to have enjoyed himself, even if he was also a little overwhelmed by two rambunctious kids.

Well, she could hardly blame him for being overwhelmed. Or for having fun.

The more Nina saw Rashad outside of a business setting, the more she found herself drawn to him. It was dangerous, she knew that, but without the cold and ruthless veneer, there was a lot to admire in this man. He was considerate, smart, and willing to forfeit a game so that a child could win. He could cook. He seemed amused by her twins instead of annoyed. And yes, he was handsome, with those dark eyes and hair, his height, and his athletic build. Nina had seen him lift a chair over his head while clearing a space for the freeze dancing, as easily as if it weighed nothing.

Nina sighed and put a slice of cheese on the sandwich she was making. Rashad might have a kinder side, but that didn't mean that he was going to be anything but a businessman during their meeting tonight. She needed to keep her wits about her.

Rashad was still the enemy.

CHAPTER 9

RASHAD

Rashad winced at the sight of the first email in his inbox. Amira had written, with a copy to Abdul, to ask about updates on the meeting with Nina. The problem, of course, was that Rashad didn't have any updates — he'd spent the last day and a half bonding with Nina and her kids instead of looking for ways to take over her

company.

Usually, Rashad would have answered immediately, but today, he just closed his email without replying. He'd get back to his business partners when he had something to tell them. Otherwise, they would just question his process, which wouldn't help anyone — especially since Rashad was questioning himself.

The sound of high-pitched laughter echoed from the dining area, and Rashad smiled to himself. He'd enjoyed the day with the twins and their beautiful mother more than he'd expected to. He knew that he should have pushed to have a business meeting with Nina after lunch, but he hadn't wanted to. She needed time to recover after her illness, and Rashad had wanted to get to know her a little better.

The sound of laughter faded. Rashad did a little more work, though it was hard to concentrate, before allowing himself to get up and wander out of his cabin. Nina and the kids were nowhere in sight, so she must be putting them to bed. He spotted a neat stack of coloring books, the panda princess he'd been working on lying on top, and two identical boxes of crayons — the only sign that his boat was inhabited by young children.

While he waited for Nina to emerge, Rashad took over the kitchen, whipping up a quick but delicious menu of fish tacos with fresh cabbage slaw and crispy potatoes. It was his own recipe, just like almost everything he cooked. By the time Nina returned, he'd set the table with two plates, two wine glasses, and the food. Even better, the sun had begun to paint the sky with vibrant oranges and reds as sunset approached. The colors reflected off the waves, which stretched unbroken to the horizon, offering a view so beautiful Rashad wished he could capture it in his memory forever.

“Wow.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Rashad turned from the railing, where he'd been standing to enjoy the sunset, and caught sight of Nina. She was still in her skirt and top, but she'd taken her hair out of the braid so that it fell in loose waves around her shoulders. The sunset caught golden undertones in her blond curls and highlighted her sky-blue eyes, making her look like a princess from one of Kate's books. Now, he noticed that she had a few faded freckles across her high cheekbones, just like the twins had.

"If you're talking about the sunset, I made that just for you." Rashad winked, and Nina rolled her eyes.

"Right, I'm sure. Something smells delicious, though, and I believe you did make that."

"I made some fish tacos while you were putting the kids to bed. Are they asleep?"

"Yes, at last. They really wanted to watch Paw Patrol, but they settled for three picture books instead."

"They're good at bargaining. Did they get that from you?"

"I won't give away my secrets before we enter into a negotiation." Nina smiled and took a seat at the table, crossing her legs at the ankle. "Shall we get started over dinner?"

"Let's eat first." Rashad was still putting off the difficult conversation he knew they'd have.

“The food does smell good, so that’s all right with me.”

“Would you like some wine?” Rashad asked, lifting the bottle.

Nina hesitated. “I don’t drink often, but sure. One glass won’t hurt.”

Rashad poured some wine for each of them. He watched as Nina took a taco and bit into it.

“Mmm.” She swallowed the first bite. “Delicious. I’d ask you to send me the recipe, but I’m sure you don’t have one.”

“Correct.” Rashad took a taco for himself. “This kind of culinary magic only happens naturally.”

“Culinary magic.” Nina chuckled. “You think so highly of yourself. But you’re right — thisisamazing.” She took another bite.

“Thanks.”

“Who taught you how to cook?”

“My uncle.” Rashad bit into his own taco. “Like me, he’s a second son, so we had a bond from the beginning. He taught me to cook, took me on trips, and always made me feel special.”

“Is it hard, being a second son in a royal family?” Nina asked.

Rashad hesitated. Part of him wanted to open up to Nina about the difficulties of growing up as a spare, but a stronger, smarter part knew that would be a mistake. He and Nina were still rivals, even if they’d had a nice day. Even if talking to her was a

rush far different from the ones he experienced at work.

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “Do you have siblings?”

“No, I’m an only child. I’m glad Miles and Kate have each other, though. I imagine there must be difficult things about having a sibling, but I’ve seen the way those two love each other. I think they’ll both be better off for having each other.”

“I think so, too.” Rashad sipped his wine. “Even when they’re disagreeing, it’s clear that they still care about each other. Do they have that twin connection where they can read each other’s minds?”

“Hm.” Nina took another bite. “Sort of. Although I think it’s less that they can read each other’s minds and more that they’re together so much that they kind of know what the other one wants and needs.” She smiled. “I appreciate you taking an interest in my kids, but we really don’t have to talk about them now.”

“What would you like to talk about, then? Deep secrets? Hidden desires? The pros and cons of following a recipe in cooking?” Rashad hadn’t flirted with Nina since that first night at the event — until now. Now, though, he wasn’t flirting with her because he wanted something from her, but simply because he enjoyed the way she laughed when he said something over-the-top.

“If you don’t want to start on business, perhaps the best thing we can do is talk about something that’ll take our minds off business and kids and everything.” Nina wasn’t quite matching his flirtations, but she was smiling, and that was enough for now.

“Like what?”

“If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you live?”

“Right here,” Rashad answered without missing a beat. “On the yacht. I love Al Soub, but I think it would be amazing to live on the water. Perhaps I’d sail around to visit new places, or perhaps I’d stay moored somewhere. Either way, it seems very peaceful, doesn’t it?”

“It really does.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“How about you? Where would you live?”

“Well, I think that if I ever stop working, I’d want to live somewhere rural. Somewhere with trees and lakes and friendly deer who come by in the morning to try stealing the cabbage from my garden. Somewhere you can hear the birds trill in the mornings and watch the sun go down each night, like we did now. Somewhere the kids could run and play.”

“That does sound lovely. Do you want to stop working?” Rashad asked. Perhaps this was a chance, an opening. If Nina wanted to step back from her company, Rashad could offer her a very generous buyout, enough that she and her kids could move to some beautiful rural area and chase a new kind of dream.

“No.” Nina raised her eyes to Rashad’s, all the playfulness suddenly gone. “I don’t. I like to daydream about having more time to spend with my kids. And someday, yes, I would like to retire and have a little garden and go for long walks and all that. But right now, my work is far too important, and I can’t give it up. I can’t let anyone else do it for me. And I certainly can’t allow it to be stolen.”

Rashad sighed internally. It looked like he wouldn’t have the easy out he’d hoped for. He wondered why Nina’s work mattered so much to her, but decided it was better not to ask.

“I understand. My business is extremely important, too, and I couldn’t give it up.”

“I think that brings us to the real purpose for this trip.” Nina set aside her empty plate, folding her hands on the table and raising her blue eyes to meet Rashad’s. Instead of

looking like a friendly, easygoing young mother, she now looked like an unwavering businesswoman who wouldn't back down for anything.

"We don't have to discuss that right now."

"I think we should." Nina bit her lip, drawing Rashad's attention there. "I wanted to approach this differently, but we've gotten to know each other a bit over the last few days, so I'll be as direct as I can be. I know about your reputation, Rashad. I know that you put companies out of business so that your own can thrive. I know you bring your rivals on trips like this so that you can plumb them for information. I know that the deals you offer are rarely adequate but are always accepted. Really, the only thing I really need to know from you is this: are you planning to buy Heartbeat, or are you just going to drive me out of the market?"

Rashad hesitated. The real answer was that he wasn't sure yet — he needed more information about Nina's company before he'd know if it was worth trying to purchase it from her. Yet he didn't want to give her that answer, not after he'd spent the day with her and her kids. Not after he'd seen her radiant smile as she scooped one of her kids into the air or met her eyes over the kids' heads when they said something funny. Not after he'd seen how her hair blew in the breeze or watched her twirl around the kitchen, teasing him effortlessly.

"Rashad," Nina said, her voice soft, "I like to think that we had a nice time together today. Don't we owe it to each other to be honest?"

"You'd like me to be honest?" Rashad sighed. "I'll do my best. You're right; I've driven a lot of companies out of the market and bought several others. But that doesn't mean I'll do the same thing to you. Perhaps we can work something out that will benefit us both."

Nina raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

“Why not?” Rashad’s thoughts were racing, even as he made suggestions he wasn’t sure he could keep. “Tomorrow let’s sit down with all our information on the table and see what we can work out. But tonight, let’s just enjoy the stars and the water and the company.”

“All right.” Nina raised her glass. “We can do that. But don’t think that a nice dinner and a little small talk will make me easier to manipulate.”

“I would never.” Rashad pressed a hand to his heart. “I’m not always the scoundrel you seem to think I am.”

“I suppose not.” Their eyes met, and Rashad felt as though everything was standing still, just for a fraction of a second. Then Nina looked away, and he stood to stack the plates. He needed some air, which must be Nina’s doing, since they were already outside.

“Can I interest you in dessert?”

“Sure, what do you have?” Nina looked as flustered as Rashad felt.

“Mostly ice cream.”

“Perfect. What kind?”

“I have chocolate, mint chip, and pistachio.”

“I’ll have a scoop of each, please.”

“Great, I’ll be right back.” Rashad carried the plates into the galley, set them on the counter, and took a deep breath. It was all he could do not to put his head in his hands. He’d made a mistake — one that would cost him.

Rashad was ruthless — it was one of his best tactics and had always served him well. Yet today, looking at Nina across the table, he hadn't been able to be as ruthless as he would have liked. And as a result, he'd probably given them both false hope. The best-case scenario was offering Nina a generous buyout, which wouldn't be satisfactory for her since she wanted to keep working, nor profitable for Rashad, who would have to spend a lot to give her an equitable buyout. If both apps were on the market simultaneously, it would mean that neither could achieve as much reach, which would reduce Rashad's profits and mean that he'd failed in his new market.

There wasn't a solution that could benefit them both. Or, if there was, Rashad couldn't find it.

Rashad loaded the plates into the dishwasher before serving a few scoops of ice cream for himself and Nina. His misstep might cost him in the long run, but it would allow him one more pleasant evening with Nina before everything fell apart tomorrow. At least that was something.

When Rashad returned to the table, Nina was on her phone. As he approached, she slid the phone into her pocket and looked up at him with a smile. She looked surer of herself than she had a few moments ago.

"Here you go." Rashad set her ice cream in front of her. "You know, it's rare to meet a woman who likes both mint chip and pistachio."

"I'm here for any green ice cream." Nina took a spoonful of the pistachio and popped it into her mouth. "Pistachio, mint, lime... they're all good. Although I once tried a spinach ice cream at an artisanal ice-cream shop in San Diego and it was horrible."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“It sounds horrible. Why did you try it?”

“I had a bet with, um, the twins’ father that I couldn’t finish it.”

“Did you win?”

“I did.” Nina grinned and took another spoonful. Rashad hesitated, but his curiosity won out.

“The twins’ father isn’t in the picture.” He knew that already from what Nina had said on the first morning.

“No. We dated for a while, but when he found out that I was pregnant, he decided he didn’t want to be a father and left. We’re better off without him.” Nina smiled again, and Rashad got the feeling that she really believed that.

“I’m really sorry that happened.” Rashad felt a burst of righteous indignation on Nina’s behalf. “I can’t believe he would walk out on you when you were pregnant.”

“Well, these things happen.” Nina shrugged. “He wasn’t the love of my life or anything, and the twins and I have done well on our own.”

“Clearly. Your kids are amazing.” There was more Rashad wanted to say — about how impressive Nina was, running a business and raising kids. About how intrigued he was by the fact that she was single. About how gorgeous she was. Yet he had already made a big enough mistake when he told Nina there might be a way for them both to win, and he wasn’t going to double down now.

“Thanks. I like them.” Nina winked. “So, you know that the twins’ father isn’t in my life. Do you have someone special in yours?” Her expression was innocent, but there was an undertone to her question that made Rashad’s heart flutter.

Rashad shook his head. “I’m too busy with work to date much, so, no, there isn’t anyone.” It was true, but there was more to it — Rashad also knew he’d never be as dedicated to a woman as he was to his work. He wasn’t just busy; he spent almost every waking moment thinking about how to improve Health Trackr. Except, strangely, today, when he’d barely thought about business at all.

“I understand that. Although you must get a lot of interest, seeing as you’re a businessman and a royal.”

“I could say the same for you.”

“I’m not a royal.” Nina smiled.

“No, but you are pretty extraordinary.”

“Hmm.” Nina took another spoonful of her ice cream. “Sure. I suppose if you count rarely sleeping for more than five hours or coding while cooking dinner to be extraordinary, I suppose I am.”

“Both those things are pretty impressive,” Rashad replied. “I’m amazed by how well you function on not a lot of sleep. And coding while cooking is amazing. Do you really do coding for your own app?”

“Of course. I try to do as much of the work myself as I can.”

“I thought you studied biology, not computer science.”

“I did. My biology background helped me design the medical parts of the app — pulse tracking, sleep-cycle evaluation, all that. But I also taught myself coding so that I’d understand as much about my app as I could. Do you also do your own coding?”

“No, not at all. I understand some of the basics, but I mostly run the business side.” Rashad shook his head. “See? Extraordinary. Why do you do so much of the work yourself instead of hiring a team, if I may ask?”

“I try to keep costs down so that more people can afford the app,” Nina explained. “By doing as much of the work as possible myself, I can do that.”

“You’d make more money if you increased the app prices, though,” Rashad pointed out.

Nina chuckled and leaned back, raising her hands. “Wow, thank you for that insight. I’ve never thought of that before.”

“Sorry.” Rashad made a face. “I’m sure you’ve done all the calculations.”

“Of course. I just decided that some things are more important than profit, at least right now. Anyway, let’s not talk about business. That’s a conversation for tomorrow.” Nina leaned forward again. “Tell me more about your cooking.”

Their conversation meandered through easy topics as the stars grew brighter in the sky above and the air took on a gentle chill. Rashad found that he enjoyed talking to Nina very much, whether they were chatting about cooking or about their businesses. In fact, he liked everything about her, from her easy confidence about her work to her blond curls that lifted slightly in the warm ocean breeze.

Just before midnight, they both caught sight of the time and agreed that it was time to sleep.

“I’ll walk you to your cabin.” Rashad got up to clear their bowls.

“Oh, that’s really all right; I think I know where I need to go.”

“Please, it would be my pleasure.”

So, they walked together to Nina’s cabin, their pace unhurried. Rashad wanted a few more minutes with Nina before they both slept, and she seemed to feel the same way.

“I really enjoyed this evening,” Nina said as they turned into her hallway. “And thank you again for all your help with Miles and Kate today.”

“It was my pleasure.” They stopped in front of Nina’s door. She reached for the handle, then hesitated, turning back to Rashad.

“And it’s been really nice getting to know you a little.” She looked down, then up at him.

“Trust me, the feeling is mutual.” Their eyes met, and Rashad felt a spark of warmth grow in his heart. Nina was so close, just a few inches away, and he could easily reach out and tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. Her pink lips were slightly parted, and her blue eyes were bright. She smelled faintly of vanilla and ice cream. The tension built until it took all Rashad had to not lean closer and press his lips lightly to hers, the kind of light, fleeting kiss that would let him know if she shared the attraction he felt.

“Good night, Rashad,” Nina said softly. Then she opened the door to her cabin and was gone. Rashad stood in the hallway for another moment before he turned and strode back to the deck. He needed some fresh air to clear his head.

Today, the lines between business rivals and friends had become blurred. Worse,

standing outside her cabin, Rashad had been tempted to blur the lines even further with a kiss, which would have made everything far more complicated.

He needed to pull himself together. Now. Tomorrow morning, first thing, he'd sit down with Nina and hammer out a plan. He would be ruthless and straightforward, no matter how hard it was, and the following morning, Nina and the twins would disembark. That would be it — he'd never see them again.

It was the only way. Kissing Nina simply wasn't an option.

CHAPTER 10

RASHAD

Rashad woke the next morning more dedicated than ever to his plan. Over breakfast, he was going to talk to Nina and work out whether he'd be offering to buy her company or whether he'd just defeat her in the market. He wasn't going to go easy on her, no matter how funny or insightful or beautiful she was.

Rashad took a quick shower to clear his head, dressed, and went up on deck. To his surprise, Nina and the kids were already awake despite the early hour. Kate and Miles were chasing each other around the dining table, giggling, while Nina set out a plate of steaming pancakes.

"Good morning, Rashad." She smiled at him as she went back into the kitchen for a bowl of sliced fruit.

"Good morning. You really didn't have to cook."

"It was no trouble. You've been cooking for us, so it seemed like time to return the favor. Plus, I wanted to show you how good food can be when you follow a recipe."

Nina winked, and attraction stirred in Rashad again.

Be strong,he chastised himself.You have to get this over with.

“I’m sure the pancakes will be delicious,” he said, rather stiffly.

“Kids, breakfast!” Nina called over her shoulder.

“Can we eat here, Mommy?” Miles asked. He and Kate had built a little fort out of the lounge pillows.

“Is that all right?” Nina asked Rashad quietly. “I don’t mind, but if you don’t want them to eat away from the table, I’ll say no.”

“It’s fine; we’re outside so it’ll be easy to clean,” Rashad told her. Plus, it would be better if the kids ate separately. Having breakfast alone with Nina would give him an opportunity to get down to business without the kids’ sweet faces staring up at him.

“Thanks.” Nina prepared two plates and carried them over to the twins’ fort, then returned to the table with Rashad. They both dished up a few pancakes, though Rashad hardly felt hungry.

“I thought we could get down to business today,” he said.

“That would be great. After all, we’re running out of time.” Nina smiled. “Strawberries?” She held out a bowl of the bright red fruit.

“Sure, thanks.” If only they were sitting in a meeting room instead of around a breakfast table — though Rashad was beginning to suspect that nothing could make hurting Nina any easier. “I was up late last night thinking about how to proceed. It would make things easier if I knew a little more about your company’s internal

functioning.”

“All right.” Nina nodded. “I can imagine the kinds of details you’re interested in, but let me tell you what I think is the most important thing about my company.” She poured a ribbon of syrup onto her pancakes, and Rashad was tempted to tease her about how no one over the age of five should have that much syrup. Instead, he gestured for her to continue.

“Please.”

Nina took a deep breath. “When I was a little girl, I had a favorite aunt. Aunt Katherine. She was always there for me growing up — she helped me with homework, took me out for special day trips, encouraged my dreams, everything. She seemed old and wise to me when I was young, but what I didn’t realize was that she was younger than we are now. When I was fifteen, she started moving more slowly and complaining of aches and pains. She went to a few doctors, but it was hard for her to afford testing, especially since our insurance didn’t cover much, and doctors were dismissive.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Finally, one doctor made the effort to run the right tests and find a diagnosis for her. Within a few weeks, we had the results that other doctors hadn’t found for years: Aunt Katherine had breast cancer. Stage Four. She didn’t live long after that. If one of the first doctors she’d seen had run those same tests, they would have caught the cancer at an earlier stage, and she might have lived. If she’d had a primary care physician, she might have been screened even sooner. It was such a clear failure of the medical system that I was able to see it clearly, even at just fifteen years old.

“I knew, right then, that I was going to dedicate my life to helping people like my aunt. First, I imagined I’d become a doctor, which is why I studied biology in college. Yet the further I went through my studies, the more I realized that the problem isn’t a lack of well-trained doctors — it’s a lack of resources for people to monitor their own health and find affordable healthcare when they need it. That’s why I developed Heartbeat. I never wanted another family to lose someone to a disease that could have been cured if diagnosed earlier.”

“Nina.” Rashad shook his head. “I’m amazed. Truly. I’ve heard dozens of company-origin stories, but never one like that.”

“That’s because it’s not just a story to me,” Nina told him. Those beautiful blue eyes met his again, full of sincerity. “It’s real. It’s my Aunt Katherine.”

“Katherine...” Rashad paused. “Like Kate.” Puzzle pieces were starting to fall into place: he understood now why Nina charged so little for her app, why she worked so hard to do everything herself, and why she didn’t want to stop working.

“Yes. I named my daughter after my aunt.” Nina smiled. “I know Aunt Katherine

would be proud of her little namesake.”

“I’m sure she would be. And she’d be even prouder of you, for all the work you’ve done in her name.”

“I like to imagine that she would be.” Nina shook her head as though releasing the story from her mind. “Sorry, I know this story probably wasn’t what you had in mind when you asked for more details about my company. What did you want to know?”

Rashad opened his folder and, together, they began to go through the questions he had. Yet he couldn’t put Nina’s story out of his mind. He couldn’t stop imagining her as a young girl, losing a beloved aunt and swearing never to let history repeat itself. And he couldn’t stop thinking of Nina now, working tirelessly to make sure no one was denied the opportunity for quality healthcare.

Yet here Rashad was, trying to put Nina out of business so that he could have a higher profit himself. For the first time since he had put Health Trackr on the market in Al Soub, Rashad began to doubt his work. Perhaps Nina was right; perhaps there was something that mattered more than profit.

As they spoke, Rashad noticed that Nina was more open today than during their other brief conversations. She shared about Heartbeat’s profits and earning potential, though Rashad was certain she was still leaving some information out. The more he knew about Nina’s company, the more impressed he was. If she’d gone into business purely for profits, she might be the one trying to buy his company right now.

“And this kind of crowdsourcing for app development is another way we manage to keep costs as low as we do,” Nina said.

“That’s great. Thanks for the details.”

“What other questions do you have?”

A glance at Rashad’s watch showed that they’d been deep in conversation for more than two hours. Kate and Miles were still playing together without any fuss, which was impressive — Rashad might not know much about children, but the last few days had taught him that kids their age needed a lot of entertainment.

“Actually, I think that was the last one,” Rashad told her.

“Great.” Nina folded her hands. “That was efficient.”

In truth, there were more questions Rashad should ask — like how much she’d be willing to accept as a buyout. But he understood now that buying Nina out of her company would be just as much of a betrayal as putting her out of business. Heartbeat was like her third child, and there was no way she’d give it up without a fight.

“Rashad?” Nina bit her lip. “You look so serious.”

Rashad felt serious. For the first time in his business career, there wasn’t a clear-cut way forward. Unless... He almost dismissed the idea immediately, but he couldn’t quite put it out of his mind. What if he and Nina worked together? What if they could actually both benefit from this meeting, instead of just Rashad?

“I want to make you an offer,” Rashad said. He knew he should take more time to consider this and talk to his investors, but he didn’t want to give himself time to back out.

“An offer?” Nina sighed. “I’m sorry, Rashad. I thought I was clear. I’m not interested in a buyout.”

“That’s not the offer I want to make.” Rashad leaned forward. In the clear sunlight,

Nina's blond hair seemed to glow golden, and her blue eyes sparkled — but her beauty wasn't the reason Rashad was doing this. He was trying to do the right thing.

“All right, continue.”

“What if we can go into business together, as partners instead of rivals?” Rashad took a breath as more of his plan came together. “We could help each other. If we compete in the open market, one of us would lose. And one of our companies would probably go out of business, meaning the loss of years of hard work. But together... together, perhaps we can build something better than either of us could create on our own.”

“Are you really offering for us to work together?” Nina asked. She bit her bottom lip. “I don't know... I've really enjoyed getting to know you, but our business styles are very different.”

“I'm much more ruthless and profit-oriented than you,” Rashad filled in. “I'm not ignoring that. If we work together, we'd definitely have a lot to figure out. I just think it might be worth it.”

“You might be right.” Nina took a deep breath, then glanced over at her twins. “Can I have a little time to think about it?”

“Absolutely.” Rashad swept the paperwork back into the folder. “We can both take a little time to consider. How about we have a snack and take the afternoon off? I'm sure by evening we'll both have a lot more clarity.”

“That sounds great.” Nina got to her feet and held out a hand across the table. Rashad took it, feeling the warmth of her small hand in his own. “Thank you, Rashad.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Thankyou, Nina.” Neither of them let go for a beat longer than was strictly proper in a handshake. Then Rashad squeezed her hand once and released it.

“I’ll get started on something to eat.”

“I’ll check on the kids and join you.”

As Rashad went into the kitchen to prepare a spread, he couldn’t help wondering if he’d made another, much bigger, mistake. Going into business with Nina sounded like the perfect solution to both their problems — he’d eliminate his competition, and Nina would be able to keep her beloved company. Yet the two of them were polar opposites, and Rashad hadn’t even spoken to his investors yet.

There was a good chance he had let his admiration for Nina point him down a problematic path. Yet this might also be the best decision he’d made in years.

Only time would tell.

CHAPTER 11

NINA

Nina’s head was spinning, though not because of illness this time. Rashad, a man known for his ruthless business practices and lack of regard for anyone else’s story, had just offered to go into business with her. Nina could hardly believe it. Perhaps Rashad had an ulterior motive — or perhaps he was just a better man than she’d thought. Either way, she had a lot to think about before she gave him an answer, even

though her heart told her to just say yes.

“All done?” Miles asked, looking up from his book.

“Yes, honey, the meeting is over.” Nina got up from her chair and stretched, not trusting herself to look at Rashad just yet. “Did you have fun coloring?”

“Yeah, but I’m hungry.”

“Perfect, because it’s time for a snack.” Nina helped her kids clean up, her thoughts still distant. Rashad had given her time to think about whether she wanted to accept his offer, but Nina was sure that no amount of time would be enough. She had no idea how to decide. All her previous business decisions had been based on calculations — potential customers reached, potential money saved, potential investment gained. Yet this time, Nina worried that her decision would be influenced more by how she felt than by logic.

Rashad appeared from the kitchen a few minutes later with a plate of apple slices and crackers. The kids dug in enthusiastically, and even Nina found herself reaching for an apple slice.

“Thanks, Rashad.”

“No problem. Hey, I was thinking — there’s an uninhabited island up ahead. If you’d like, after our snack, we can take the kids swimming there.”

“Swimming!” Kate’s eyes lit up and Nina grinned.

“That sounds like a yes. Let’s do it.”

“Excellent. I’ll set the course.”

“Can I help drive?” Miles asked.

“Honey, Rashad might be busy this time,” Nina said. Just because the businessman had so kindly watched her kids the day before didn’t mean that he wanted to spend all his time with them. Rashad, though, was already nodding.

“Sure, Miles. Nina, it’s no trouble. I’ll keep a close eye on him. Kate, do you want to come?”

“Yes, please!” The little girl wiggled with excitement.

“Then we can all go.”

They finished the snacks before climbing to the deck, where Rashad helped Kate and Miles take turns steering. Slowly, a small island appeared in the cerulean water. Just as Rashad had said, it was uninhabited, with white-sand beaches and a collection of palm trees. Cerulean waves capped with white foam lapped against the shore, and a few seagulls flew overhead. The whole island looked like an image cut from a postcard.

“Nina, would you like to try steering?” Rashad asked.

“Oh, I’m not sure I know how to steer a boat.”

“It’s okay, Mommy, you can do it,” Miles said, grinning up at Nina with a gap-toothed smile.

“All right, then.” Nina took her place in front of the wheel, putting her hands at ten and two like she would on a car steering wheel.

“Actually, you want to hold it like this.” Rashad reached around her and gently

repositioned her hands on the wheel. Nina felt a shiver rush down her spine at his closeness and the feeling of his hands on hers. From this near, Rashad smelled like aftershave and something spicy, a manly smell that made her want to lean against him.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Nina took a deep breath and focused on the yacht. She couldn't let herself get distracted by Rashad's soft voice in her ear.

"This does feel more natural," she said.

"Perfect. Now try this..."

In retrospect, Nina didn't remember much of the sailing lesson. All she remembered was the feeling of Rashad's hands on hers, strong and confident, and the way he joked with her in a kind way whenever she struggled to do something. She remembered his warmth against her back and his aftershave scent and how he guided her gently towards the scrap of land in the near distance.

Soon, they arrived at the island. Rashad took over the last bit of steering, bringing them in at a safe distance from the island's sandbar.

"We've arrived," he said. "We can go over to the island in the dinghy."

"Excellent. I'll take Kate and Miles to get our swimsuits on."

"See you in a few minutes."

Back in their cabin, Nina helped the twins into their swimsuits and slathered them with sunblock. She helped Kate gather her wispy hair back into two ponytails and found both kids' goggles. Finally, Nina changed into her own swimsuit. She'd brought a functional dark blue swimsuit, the same one she wore when she went to the pool to swim laps in the mornings, but now she half-wished she'd brought something

a little more flattering.

Nina quickly shook that thought out of her head. The blue suit was a good choice, and it wasn't like she had anyone to show off for. Certainly, she wasn't trying to look nice for Rashad — just because he'd turned out to be a lot less of a jerk than she'd anticipated, that didn't mean that she was interested in him. She could be around an attractive, nice-smelling, intriguing man while wearing her regular, practical, boring swimsuit.

Nina put on a little sunblock of her own, then led the kids out to meet Rashad. While they were gone, he'd prepared the dinghy and changed into a pair of swim trunks with no shirt. Nina tried not to stare at the clearly defined muscles of his chest, abs, and shoulders as he effortlessly tossed a cooler bag and an inflatable raft into the dinghy.

Rashad turned, smiling, and caught sight of Nina. For a long moment, his eyes seemed to catch on her as he swept his gaze from her flip-flop-clad feet to her broad sunhat, then quickly to her face. She saw something there — desire, perhaps. Or perhaps the warm sun and excitement of the day was making her jump to conclusions.

“Ready to go?”

“Yep.” Nina crossed her arms over her stomach self-consciously, before quickly returning them to her sides.

“Let me help you in.” Rashad held out a hand to Nina, who used it as a stabilizer while she climbed into the dinghy. Next, Rashad handed Kate, then Miles, into the dinghy, both kids giggling excitedly at the prospect of an adventure. The dinghy had a small motor on the back, which Rashad used to navigate them to the white-sand beach nearest the yacht. When they arrived on shore, Kate and Miles couldn't wiggle

out of the boat fast enough.

“You know the rules,” Nina said.

“Stay in sight. Only go in the water with you,” Miles and Kate chorused.

“Good job.”

With everyone satisfied that the rules were being followed, the twins leaped from the boat and began to chase each other around in the sand. Nina and Rashad disembarked at a more sedate pace.

“This is beautiful.” Nina scuffed her foot through the warm, soft sand, leaving a line in her wake. The sound of the waves crashing and the seagulls calling and the wind in the palms made her feel like she was on a tropical island in the middle of the Pacific, far from all her worries. “Have you been here before?”

“No, but I spotted it on the map this morning.” Rashad smiled. “I thought the kids would enjoy it.”

“Clearly, you were wrong.” Nina winked to show that she was joking, though it would have been obvious from the way the twins were now making sand angels on the ground.

“Clearly.” Rashad nudged her shoulder with his own. “I’m hoping their mother will enjoy the excursion, too. It seems like you could use a vacation.”

“Do I look that tired?” Nina raised her eyebrows.

“No, not at all?—”

“I’m messing with you. I could definitely use a vacation — but so could you. You clearly work incredibly hard.”

“Running a business is a lot, but you run a business and raise a family.”

“Honestly, it’s hard, but I think my family reminds me of why my business is so important. It might be harder to do one without the other. I want to leave a legacy for Aunt Katherine, but I also want to create a legacy for them.” Nina nodded to the twins, who were now trying to draw sandy smiley faces on the sand angels they’d made. “I want them to be proud someday when they tell people who their mother is.”

“They’ll definitely be proud.” Rashad nodded slowly, then took a seat on the sand. Nina sat beside him, stretching her legs in front of her and enjoying the warmth of the sand on the backs of her bare legs.

“Thanks. I hope so.” Nina dug her toes into the sand, hesitating. “Do you think you’ll ever want a family?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Maybe.” Rashad shrugged. “I feel too busy to be a good father or husband, though. I wouldn’t want my family to come second.”

“I understand that.” Nina sighed. “I always try to make sure my kids come first, but it can be hard.”

“Mommy!” Kate came running over, her cheeks pink with excitement and her hair and limbs already sandy. “Can we go swimming?”

“Of course.” Nina rolled to her feet. “Rashad, care to join us?”

“I’d love to.”

“Then I’ll race you to the water!” Nina took off across the beach at a sprint, little storms of sand flying up behind her. Giggling, Kate fell into step beside her, and Rashad passed them both, running with the form of someone who did marathons in his spare time. He splashed into the water, Nina and Kate coming in behind him. Kate jumped into the shallow water, giggling, and her brother came running past Nina to join her.

The water was warm and refreshing on Nina’s feet. She listened to the sounds of her children shrieking with joy and watched the ocean stretching on towards the horizon and, in that moment, she felt that all was well with the world. Yes, there was Rashad’s business proposal to deal with, but even that didn’t seem as overwhelming right now.

“It’s a beautiful view, isn’t it?” Rashad asked. He was standing beside Nina now,

looking out towards the horizon, his brown eyes thoughtful.

“It is.” Nina dragged a hand through the water, then splashed Rashad with an arc of clear water. For a moment, Rashad just stared at her, and Nina thought she might have made a mistake. But he dipped his own hand into the water, sending a torrential wave over Nina and soaking her entirely. Kate and Miles caught on to the fun, and soon both twins were wildly splashing the adults, calling out to each other gleefully. It all came to a head when Rashad lifted Nina out of the water and into his arms before carrying her out into the ocean and submerging her entirely. Nina came up, spluttering and laughing, in time to hear Miles and Kate clamoring to be the next one Rashad picked up and set in the water.

It had been a while since Nina had felt like this, completely free and with abandon. Sure, she played with her kids often, but as much as she tried to focus on them, there was always a to-do list playing in the back of her mind. Today, Nina felt like a little girl again, splashing and laughing and swooping her kids through the air and trying to knock Rashad’s feet out from under him so that he’d take a dip in the water too.

“Come on, grab his hands!” Nina called to Miles and Kate. Obediently, the twins grabbed a hand each and pulled on Rashad as hard as they could. Nina took advantage of his distraction to push Rashad back by the shoulders, and finally, with a stumbling splash, Rashad fell into the water. The twins and Nina cheered as Rashad came back up, shaking water from his eyes. Nina tried to ignore how good he looked, shirtless and dripping-wet with seawater.

“You’ll all pay for that!” Rashad announced, his brown eyes gleaming. He went for Miles first, holding the little boy under the arms and spinning him around before gently tossing him into the water. Kate put up a fight, running away and laughing before she let Rashad catch her, but soon he was spinning her around and tossing her carefully into the water, too. Finally, Rashad turned to Nina.

“Okay, okay.” Nina held up her hands as she backed up. “There’s no way you can spin me around like that, so let’s call a truce.”

“No way!” Rashad shook his head as he advanced on Nina. “You were definitely the mastermind behind pushing me in the water. I can’t let you go.”

“I’ve learned my lesson,” Nina said, still laughing.

“I doubt it. You’ve offended an Al Soubi sheikh. You have no idea what you’ve done.” With one quick motion, Rashad closed the distance between them and swept Nina into his arms. She was so surprised that she wrapped her arms around his neck as he spun her around then gently dropped her into the water. When Nina reemerged, Miles and Kate were clapping and shouting for their turn to be next.

The four of them played in the water for a long time. The twins had so much fun that they dragged their feet and moaned when it was time to get out, but Rashad suggested that they could have a sandcastle competition next, and eventually both kids got out of the water. As they all flopped side by side on the sand, still laughing and all tired, Nina had the feeling once again that they probably looked like a family to a casual observer. There was the playful and fun dad, who had tossed Kate and Miles in the air over and over again while they begged for more. There was the equally fun, if a little tired, mom, who splashed everyone and laughed as hard as either of the kids. And there were the kids themselves, both happy and excited for a day out.

Of course, the four of them were nowhere close to being an actual family.

“Thank you so much for playing with us,” Nina said as she reclined back on her elbows. The twins had quickly regained their energy and were working on a joint sandcastle that was already nearly as tall as Kate, but Rashad and Nina were still relaxing on the sand.

“Are you kidding? That was great.” Rashad flashed Nina a genuine smile that made her heart melt. “I’d play with you and the twins anytime.”

“The offer to join us is always open.” Nina rolled towards Rashad and sat up, crossing her legs. “Speaking of which...”

“Hmm?” Rashad looked up at her, his expression turning from playful to serious.

“I’d like to accept your offer.” Nina shrugged, trying to stay casual. “I think we should go into business together.”

“Really?” Rashad sat up too, his eyes wide. “What changed your mind?”

“I’ve seen a different side of you,” Nina admitted. “There’s more to you than just a ruthless businessman. I see that now. I think I can trust you.”

“You can trust me, Nina.” Rashad smiled at her, not a playful smile nor a conniving one, but simply the genuine smile of a man who cared. “And I think we can do amazing things if we work together.”

“I think so, too.” Nina smiled back. “There are a lot of details we’ll need to work out — like what exactly it means to be in business together. But I’m looking forward to figuring it all out.”

“So am I.” Rashad’s smile widened. “As long as you don’t try to knock me into the water again.”

“I wouldn’t dare.” Nina winked.

“How about we enjoy this afternoon on the yacht, and when we get back to San Diego, we can work out all the details of our new partnership?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Are you sure you don’t want to work on it now?”

Rashad shook his head. “The twins were really patient with us this morning, but they deserve to have a fun vacation instead of just hanging out while we have a business meeting.”

“That’s sweet.” Nina drew a swirling pattern with her fingertip in the sand, suddenly feeling unable to meet Rashad’s eyes. “I’m sure they’ll enjoy a little more fun in the sun.”

Suddenly, Rashad’s hand was under Nina’s chin, tilting her head up. “They seemed very happy to play with each other while we met this morning, though.”

“Thanks for saying that.” Nina met Rashad’s eyes, her heart fluttering. Who was this considerate, thoughtful, unbelievably attractive man who cared about her and her twins? He didn’t seem like the same guy she’d met back at the event in San Diego at all.

“Mommy!” Miles came running towards them. “Did you see our castle? Were you looking?”

“Of course I was, and the castle looks amazing.” Nina moved away from Rashad, turning her full attention to her son. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

They spent the next half an hour playing on the beach, building sandcastles and chatting. Nina found that her eyes kept drifting back to Rashad, her new business partner. It was hard to believe that she’d agreed to go into business with a man she’d

just met a few days ago, but Nina felt good about her decision. There was more to Rashad than first met the eye — even if she still had a few reservations about working with him.

CHAPTER 12

RASHAD

Rashad couldn't believe that Nina had accepted his offer, but she had. Now, he had a brand-new business partner — and a very impressive one at that. He couldn't regret his decision to offer collaboration instead of competition, but he also knew there would be a lot to work out once they returned to San Diego. Not least of all, his business partners probably wouldn't be pleased that he'd made an agreement without speaking to them, but he could handle them.

"I'm hungry," Miles said, startling Rashad out of his thoughts. There was no point in dwelling over the business plans now, not when he was reclining on a white-sand beach on a secluded island, a beautiful woman and two adorable kids by his side.

"Perfect timing, then." Rashad pushed to his feet and retrieved the cooler bag he'd packed earlier. While Nina and the kids had gotten ready, he'd thrown together a few sandwiches, along with some chips and sodas from the back of a cupboard. Now, he handed out a sandwich to each twin, plus one for Nina and one for himself.

"Yummy," Kate said happily as she tore off the plastic wrap and bit into her sandwich.

"Is this another recipe-free culinary delight?" Nina asked as she more daintily removed the plastic from her own lunch.

"Do you really follow recipes for sandwiches?" Rashad raised his eyebrows.

“Because that would be going too far.”

Nina wrinkled her nose at him. “Fine, ignore the joke. This does look good, though.”

“It’s just ham, cheese, lettuce, and tomatoes. Oh, and a little garlic mayo.”

“Well, it tastes nice, and the kids seem to like it. I really appreciate that you thought of bringing something to eat.” She glanced at him, and for a moment, her smile was brighter than the warm sun overhead. In that moment, Rashad would have done almost anything to keep her smiling — like agreeing to a business deal that he never would have suggested to anyone else.

“What’s a day on the beach without a picnic?” Rashad shot a smile back at Nina, but she was looking down again.

“I just... well. It means a lot. As a single mom, it always falls to me to make sure everything goes smoothly and that the kids have a good time and that we all eat... It’s nice to have someone else looking out for us.”

Rashad’s heart went out to Nina. He’d seen her putting her kids first so many times over the last few days, including when she’d been sick but had still been willing to take care of them. It seemed that no one was putting Nina first, though. Someone should. She deserved that.

After all, Nina was an amazing woman. She was smart, funny, selfless, and gorgeous. She should have a partner by her side who told her that every day — and who always remembered to bring sandwiches during days out.

That caring partner could never be Rashad. He was just as busy as she was, they hadn’t known each other for that long, and anyway, Rashad wasn’t cut out to be a husband or a father — at least not the kind that Nina and the kids deserved. Yet in

that moment, as Nina looked down at the sand, a strange, unexpected part of Rashad wished he could be the man who supported Nina and put her first. He wished he could be a part of this sweet little family — and not just for the weekend, or just as a business partner.

Rashad put the unexpected realization out of his mind. His business was the closest thing he had to a family, and that was okay with him. Just because he'd had a lovely few days with Nina and the twins didn't mean that he was ready to join their family. It had been a great weekend — nothing more. He'd enjoy working with Nina on their joint business endeavor — nothing more.

"I'm happy to help," Rashad said, instead of any of that.

"Is there dessert?" Miles asked.

Rashad's heart sank. "Sorry, there isn't."

"Aww." Miles's face fell, but Nina stepped in before things could spiral out of control.

"There's no dessert now, but lunch was still great, right? Say thanks to Rashad for making it for us. And how about we have a little dessert after dinner, if everyone is well-behaved until then?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Thanks, Rashad.” Miles dimpled, suddenly the picture of angelic sweetness. “We’re very well-behaved. Right, Kate?”

“Yeah!” Kate grinned, and Rashad noticed that she had sand on her cheeks. It was adorable.

Everyone finished up their lunch, then the twins took another dip in the ocean under Nina and Rashad’s careful observation. Eventually, both kids grew tired. Kate fell asleep in her mother’s lap, while Miles insisted that he wasn’t sleepy at all. They took the dinghy back to the yacht, where Miles promptly flopped across a shaded lounge chair and fell asleep. Nina laid Kate down beside her brother, and Rashad fetched a thin blanket to cover the sleeping twins. Then he sat next to Nina on another pair of chairs.

“Do they always sleep so hard?” he asked. The twins looked as tired as if they’d run an iron man triathlon or gone three days without sleeping while working on an important project.

“They’re very tired from playing.” Nina smiled. “And from running around in the sun and water. Just wait, though. They’ll wake up in an hour or so full of energy and ready to play more.”

“Where does all that energy come from?”

“I have no idea. When they were younger, they always managed to run around all day after sleeping just a few hours and eating half a grape each. I could never understand how they did it — especially since I was exhausted from sleeping the same amount

they did, even though I had coffee!”

“I guess we were the same way as children — we just don’t remember. Although how we lived without coffee, I’ll never know.”

“Me neither.” Nina grinned. “I can’t go a day without coffee now, but I suppose I must have gotten my energy from somewhere else when I was a kid. My parents always said I was very energetic. Did yours say the same?”

Rashad hesitated. Perhaps it was time to be honest — at least a little. “I wasn’t around my parents much as a kid. Nannies did most of the work of raising my brother and me.”

“Really?” Nina bit her lip. “That sounds difficult.”

“It was all right, because I didn’t know anything different. We saw our parents for weekend dinners sometimes, but they were always busy with the work of running a country, and they didn’t have a lot of time for us.”

“I’m sorry.” Nina reached out and took Rashad’s hand in her own. Warmth spread up his arm from the places her fingers touched. “I know I’m busy, and I leave my kids with babysitters sometimes, too, but I never want them to feel like I don’t care about them.”

“They clearly know that you love them.” Rashad smiled at her as he threaded his fingers between hers. Her hand was smaller than his, softer, too, but they fit together perfectly. “It wasn’t the same with my parents — we always felt like a burden.”

“You should never have felt that way.” Nina shook her head. “No child is a burden. And I’m sure you were a little angel.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. My brother and I got up to plenty of mischief when we were young.”

“Like what?” Nina leaned closer, her blue eyes gleaming at the prospect of a story of childhood mischief. Not wanting to disappoint her, Rashad selected a story carefully.

“Well, once, we swapped out all the candles at a formal dinner for fake ones. It might sound silly, but it caused quite a commotion. Another time, we sneaked out of bed because we wanted to get cake from the kitchens. The whole palace was in an uproar until one of the cleaners found us, covered in chocolate frosting and sitting under one of the kitchen tables.” Rashad grinned at the memory.

“I can imagine Kate and Miles doing something like that.” Nina glanced at her sleeping children, a smile playing across her rosy lips. “Are you and your brother still close?”

“Not really. We were close as kids — after all, we were only two years apart. But as we grew older, and Khalid was trained more and more to be the sheikh, we grew distant.”

“That’s too bad.” Nina bit her lip. “I always hope that Miles and Kate will stay close, but I can’t imagine what it would be like for them if one became the ruler of a country and the other didn’t.”

“That’s a good thing about not being the ruling sheikh,” Rashad told her. “If I do ever have children, I never have to put them through that. And I don’t have as much pressure to marry or have children as Khalid did.”

“Does your brother have children?”

“Yes; he’s married with an eighteen-month-old son.”

“So, you’re an uncle.”

“I am, but I’m not very close with my nephew.” Rashad could see this conversation going down a difficult path, so he quickly changed the subject. “Do you want more kids?”

Nina released his hand and sat back in her chair. “That’s a difficult question. In theory, I would love more kids, but I think it would be almost impossible to raise more than the twins as a single mom and do a good job. If I ever have more kids, I’d want a partner by my side.”

“That makes sense.”

“Anyway, I don’t have enough time to think about more kids. I barely have time to work and look after the twins.” Nina grinned and laid her head back against the reclining chair, her hair pooling around her as her eyes fluttered shut. “My friends all sew or go bowling or watch movies, but I have time for exactly none of that.”

“I’m the same way.” Rashad grinned. “The only hobby I have time for is running, and that’s more about exercise than fun.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“I used to run, before I had kids.” Nina’s face took on a dreamy expression, though her eyes were still closed. “It was lovely.”

“I wouldn’t describe running as lovely. It’s always hard work, and it isn’t exactly fun.”

“It was for me. My aunt Katherine was a runner — she was the one who inspired me to take up running. She always made it into a game for me. We’d do a scavenger hunt while running, or play prediction games, or go on routes that looped around to make letters and spell out words. Once, we even dressed up in reindeer costumes on Christmas Eve and dashed through the neighborhood.”

“She sounds like an amazing aunt. I bet the twins would have loved her.”

“Definitely. She was great with kids.” Nina smiled.

“Mommy?”

“Oh.” Nina opened her eyes, sending a knowing smile at Rashad. “Guess who’s up?”

The twins came over, hand in hand, looking adorable and sleepy. As one, they climbed onto Nina’s chair with her, one on each side, and she wrapped her arms around them, kissing their blond heads.

“How did you sleep?” she asked.

“Good,” the twins chorused.

“Can we play hide-and-seek now?” Miles asked. “Or Uno?”

“Wouldn’t you like to rest a little more?”

Both blond heads shook no, and Nina chuckled.

“All right, then. Let’s play some hide-and-seek. Rashad, if you’d like to rest more, you absolutely can.”

But Rashad shook his head too. “I’ll play.” After all, in a few days, he would go back to his normal life of work with little time for enjoyment or rest. He might as well enjoy a little childlike fun while he had the chance.

“First, a quick shower for each of you,” Nina suggested. The twins groaned and grumbled, but she expertly lifted them into her arms and carried them off to the cabin. Rashad took advantage of the break to shower as well, and about twenty minutes later, they were all back on deck, clean and dressed in new clothes. Nina had showered, too, and changed into a flattering black-and-white sundress. Her hair was wet and loose around her shoulders and she looked all the lovelier for her lack of jewelry or makeup.

“Mommy, you count first,” Miles suggested.

“Okay. I’ll count to twenty.” Nina relaxed back in her chair and covered her eyes as the kids scrambled to their feet. “One, two, three...”

Rashad and the twins hurried into the bowels of the ship. Kate slipped into a cupboard that seemed far too small for her with an expert ease, while Miles held up his hands to Rashad.

“Will you help me hide?”

“Sure.” Rashad picked Miles up and helped him settle into a hiding spot behind the pillows on one of the guest beds. There wasn’t much time left for Rashad to hide himself, so he quickly stepped behind a door and hoped he wouldn’t be too obvious.

As Rashad waited in the semi-darkness for Nina to find him, his thoughts drifted back to the last time he’d played hide-and-seek. It had been nearly two decades ago, when he and Khalid were both young. They’d played numerous games of hide-and-seek in the palace, always trying to one-up each other with a better hiding place. Rashad had always waited, brimming with anticipation, but absolutely certain his brother would find him.

The last time they’d played, he’d waited for what felt like hours, and Khalid had never come. It turned out that he’d run into one of their tutors in the hallway, who’d told him that heirs didn’t have time for frivolous, childish games. Chastised, yet seeing the truth in the tutor’s harsh words, Khalid had gone to study, leaving Rashad unfound in his hiding place.

“Hey, there.” The sound of Nina’s sweet voice startled him out of his reverie. She was peeking around the door, her eyes crinkling in a smile. “What a good hiding place.”

“Thank you.” Rashad stepped into the light, feeling a little too happy to have been found. “Did you find the kids?”

“Not yet,” Nina said in a louder voice. “Wherever could those kids be?”

There was a giggle from the bed. Nina winked at Rashad, held a finger to her lips, then made a show of looking under the bed and in the closet before finally pulling the pillows off the bed to reveal Miles. She found Kate in her cupboard soon after.

“Again! Again!” the twins chorused. This time, Kate counted while the other three

ran off to hide. Rashad found a good spot in a linen closet and, just as time was almost up, the door opened, and Nina leaped inside.

“Hey, find your own spot,” Rashad said in a hushed voice, even as he moved over to make room for Nina.

“I couldn’t find one. Now shush.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

In the small closet, the two of them were pressed against each other. Rashad's arm was around Nina's waist, and her head was against his shoulder. She moved away just enough to look up at him, her blue eyes glowing warmly in the semi-darkness. Rashad tried not to notice how good it felt to hold Nina in his arms like this. She was truly a remarkable woman, and the more time he spent with her, the more he noticed that. Her fragrant coconut shampoo smell floated through the closet, mingling with the scent of fresh linens to be quite intoxicating.

Nina looked up at him and smiled. She was a head shorter than him, which meant that she was looking at him through her long eyelashes.

"Close quarters, hmm?" she asked. "Do you think this counts as team-building for our upcoming partnership?"

Rashad chuckled softly. "Definitely. As long as you count Kate and Miles as part of our team."

"Of course. Are you regretting your offer to work together yet?"

"Not at all. This is the best team-building I've ever participated in."

"Same here." Nina tilted her head, still looking at Rashad. Then she lifted onto her tiptoes. For one heady moment, Rashad thought that she might kiss him, but she just swept her thumb over his cheek.

"Sorry, you had an eyelash on your cheek. The kids like to make wishes on them."

“How? We don’t have this tradition in Al Soub.”

“You just think about what you want, then blow the eyelash away.” She lifted her finger, the eyelash balanced on it, towards his lips. Rashad knew what he was wishing for right this moment. He wanted to lean into her touch. He wanted to wrap his arms around Nina and pull her to him, capture her lips with his own, and whisper into her ear that he found her irresistible. He wanted to murmur her name like an incantation or the final lines of a story.

Rashad brought his lips towards Nina’s fingertip, ready to blow the eyelash away. Could he let himself wish for more time with Nina?

“There you are!” The door flew open, and Kate looked up at them with her sweet, innocent face. “Why are you hiding together?”

“I couldn’t find a spot.” Nina extricated herself from Rashad’s arms, the eyelash and the wish forgotten. “Did you find Miles already?”

“Yeah, he was easy to find.” Kate beamed. “Rashad, will you count now?”

“Sure.” Rashad was glad for the chance to have a little space. The tense moment in the linen closet, when he’d been on the verge of kissing Nina, or at least wishing to, wouldn’t soon disappear from his memory. His life was already going to be complicated enough, now that he’d offered Nina a business partnership. It would be a mistake to further complicate things by introducing a romantic element into their relationship. Keeping his gaze away from Nina and her slightly pink cheeks, Rashad covered his eyes.

“One, two, three...” He heard footsteps skittering away as he counted.

It was a mistake to allow himself to grow so close to Nina and her children. Yet

Rashad couldn't help himself. He hadn't enjoyed himself this much in years, not since starting Health Trackr. Perhaps not since he'd been a child, playing games like this with his own brother. And why shouldn't he enjoy himself? He was with a beautiful woman and a pair of children who made him laugh. As long as he reminded himself that he wasn't really part of this little family, and that he couldn't kiss Nina, it would all be all right.

He just had to keep himself from making any wishes he couldn't fulfill.

CHAPTER 13

NINA

The kids were tired after their day of swimming and hide-and-seek, but they still ate a quick pasta dinner and requested another game and a round of coloring before they agreed to be carried to bed. Rashad carried Kate, the little girl looking perfectly at ease and tinier than ever in his arms, and helped Nina tuck the twins into bed.

"Read us a story," Miles suggested sleepily.

"Sure, honey." Nina reached into her bag for the tablet with her picture books on it. "Just a minute."

"No — Rashad reads," Kate said.

Nina turned to the man in question. "Is that all right?"

"Of course." Rashad took the tablet from Nina and opened a book. In his low, soothing voice, he began to read. "Once upon a time, there were three pigs..."

As Nina listened to the story along with her children, she found her thoughts

wandering back to the closet and the moment she and Rashad had almost kissed. He had almost kissed her, hadn't he? She still remembered the feeling of his hand against the flat of her lower back and the way his eyes had darkened slightly with what looked like desire. It was a good thing that Kate had found them when she did, because if Rashad had leaned forward and kissed her, she would definitely have kissed him back.

The more she knew him, the more she wanted to feel his lips on hers and his arms around her. There was so much more to Rashad than she'd first thought. He was sweet with the kids, he loved his brother, he was willing to play and laugh with her without a single worry about looking childish... and he was very handsome. Nina's heart fluttering when he was nearby was proof enough of that.

All of this didn't mean it would be a good idea for them to kiss, though. Not at all. They'd just agreed to a business partnership, a partnership that was still far from solidified. If Nina let feelings become part of the arrangement, it could hurt the agreement they'd made — and it could hurt her. Worse, it could hurt Kate and Miles.

After all, even if Rashad were the nicest guy in the world, the kind of guy who would never hurt her, Nina would hesitate to begin a romantic relationship. Her boyfriend, the father of her children, had seemed like a good guy, but when she'd needed him the most, he'd disappeared. Nina had been alone to become a single mother and raise the twins. She wouldn't change a moment of what had happened with her ex, because it had led to her wonderful children, but that didn't mean she planned to set herself up for another broken heart, either. She also couldn't let Miles and Kate grow close to an adult who might not be a lasting part of their lives.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“And they all lived happily ever after,” Rashad said, his voice still low and soothing. He gently closed the tablet’s cover and looked down at Kate and Miles, who were sleeping peacefully in the big bed, their blond heads bent together. Then he raised his gaze to Nina and smiled. “I think they’re asleep,” he whispered.

“Come on.” Nina led the way out of the room, her steps soft and quiet so as not to wake the sleeping children. Rashad followed, staying by her side as she gently closed the bedroom door then turned to him. In her normal voice, she continued. “Shall we have some dinner?”

“That would be lovely.” Rashad started down the hallway, Nina falling into step beside him. Together, they climbed up the stairs to the kitchen. By now, the sun was already well below the horizon, and bright pinpricks of stars were beginning to emerge in the dark, velvet sky above.

“How about some Chinese-style noodles?” Nina asked, after surveying the ingredients at hand.

“I don’t know... Do you have a recipe?”

Nina rolled her eyes, grinning. “I’ve made this enough times that I know how, even without a recipe.”

“That’s a relief.” Rashad winked. “I’ll be your sous-chef. Just tell me what you need me to do.”

So, Nina directed him to help her with the chopping. Rashad started some music, and

soon they were dancing around each other, sautéing and chopping and stirring. Nina wasn't sure she'd ever cooked so easily with someone, as though they were parts of an intricate dance that wove in between the fridge and the cupboards. Soon, Nina was dishing up fragrant noodles onto two plates, and Rashad was pouring them each a glass of wine.

"Should we talk business over dinner?" Nina asked as she carried both plates to the outdoor table under the stars. The gentle sea breeze was welcome after the warm kitchen.

"Let's not. It's our last night on the yacht. We're already on the way home. Let's just enjoy each other's company for one more night."

"Rashad Al-Zayed." Nina set the plates down and slid into her seat. "If I didn't know you any better, I'd think you cared about getting to know me more than about your business interests."

"I'll never tell either way," Rashad said, handing Nina her wineglass. "But what I will say is that it's been nice to take a break from business. It's been years since I enjoyed myself like this."

"Same here." Nina took a sip of her wine. "Maybe we both need to take vacations a little more often."

"Maybe, although I doubt either of us will." Rashad twirled his chopsticks into the noodles. "I get the feeling that the minute we step onto shore, it'll be back to real life."

Nina nodded. "I think you're right. Is it strange that I don't feel excited to get back to my real life?"

“Not at all. I feel the same way.” Rashad toasted her with his glass. “Thanks to you and the kids, of course.”

“It probably helped that cell reception has been spotty since we left the harbor,” Nina pointed out. She didn’t want to think about how Rashad’s words made her heart stir. Perhaps he felt the same kind of attraction she felt for him — even if she wasn’t going to act on it, that would be nice to know. Nina had spent so long being a mom and a businesswoman that it had been a while since she’d felt like an attractive woman in her own right.

“That helped. Although now I’m worried about what happened with Health Trackr while I was relaxing.”

Nina chuckled. “I can definitely empathize with that. Whenever I step away from work, even just for a few hours, I always find myself wondering if something went wrong.”

“Same here. That’s why I never really take vacations.” Rashad shrugged.

“You know, I told you why I started Heartbeat — because of my Aunt Katherine. But you didn’t tell me why you started Health Trackr.”

“I’m not sure I should. Your story is so beautiful: honoring your aunt’s memory by making sure everyone has access to quality healthcare. My story won’t make me look very good in comparison.”

“Let me guess.” Nina leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “You started your company because you wanted to make money. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Sure, and if that was why I’d started Health Trackr, I wouldn’t hesitate to tell you.

The real reason is less flattering.”

“I’m very curious now.” Nina smoothed her hair behind her ear. “Come on, tell me.”

Rashad hesitated, but then he nodded. “All right. I mentioned my brother to you before, right?”

“Right. Khalid.” Nina nodded. “The sheikh of Al Soub and your older brother.”

“Exactly. Well, I told you about how close we were when we were young kids. We did everything together, and some part of me always thought we’d rule together, too. But the older we got, the more my parents reminded us that Khalid was the future ruling sheikh of Al Soub and the heir. And since he was the heir, that made me the spare.”

“Oh, Rashad.” Nina bit her lip.

“My parents encouraged me to know about Al Soubi politics, just in case I might need to take over the throne for some reason, but they were also clear that there was no place for me in government. Khalid was the one who needed to learn about politics. He was the one who needed to get married and produce an heir of his own. He was the one who was groomed to someday sit on Al Soub’s throne. What I did didn’t matter, as long as I was around in case the family needed me.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Soon, I realized that if I wanted to create a life for myself, it would have to be away from politics and royalty. I would need to build something of my own, something that belonged to me alone. That was the only way to make my parents, and myself, proud.

“Around that time, I was a bit reckless. I was a directionless teenager who had been told a hundred times that he was just a spare. I started snowboarding and even went skydiving once, although I’ll never do it again. One day, while I was snowboarding, I fell and broke my leg. I ended up in the hospital for about a week before they discharged me back home, and I saw how important healthcare was. Everyone needs medical attention at some point in their lives, so if I was going to start a business, something medical seemed perfect. That’s when I decided to start a business. And that’s how Health Trackr was born.”

Nina’s heart went out to Rashad. He’d mentioned his brother once or twice before, and she had gotten the impression that they had a strained relationship, but this story made everything much clearer. Nina could all too easily imagine teenage Rashad, hurt that his parents favored his brother so much and desperate to make his own way in the world.

Clearly, that was why Rashad was so ruthless in business. He felt like he had to be.

Nina had been attracted to Rashad for his good looks and his kindness to her children, but that attraction grew now as she saw yet another side of the man she was just starting to know. She wished she could reach back through time and wrap the younger version of Rashad in a hug. She wished she could reach for Rashad’s hand again, as she had that afternoon on the lounge chairs.

“So, you built Health Trackr,” Nina said instead. “What was that like?”

“It was a struggle. At first, I thought I’d ask my parents for an investment, but then I decided I needed to stand on my own feet. I went to college early and studied hard. Soon, I was able to attract two wealthy investors outside my family, Amira Kadif and Abdul Boursani, who’ve now been a part of Health Trackr since the beginning. Slowly, Health Trackr expanded through Al Soub, then other Middle Eastern countries, then slowly into the rest of the world.”

“And what did your parents say when you successfully built your business?” Nina asked. “Were they proud?”

“They don’t really care.” Rashad shrugged. He was clearly trying to look casual, but Nina could see that his parents’ indifference hurt, even now. “They’re glad I have a hobby, but I think they’d be just as happy if that hobby were golf or painting. Both my mother and father were born into royalty, so they’ve never done anything else. I don’t think they understand the value of what I do.”

“Health Trackr is amazing, though.” Nina leaned closer. “I looked into your company when I was preparing for our first meeting. Whether you started it to make money or to create something of your own or anything else, your work has saved a lot of lives. And you’ve been wildly successful at the same time — perhaps on a more ruthless path than I would take, but it’s still impressive, whether your family sees that or not. I certainly wouldn’t want to compete against you.”

“I wouldn’t want to compete against you, either.” Rashad took another sip of his wine, which reminded Nina of her own half-forgotten glass. “It’s a good thing we don’t have to.”

“It is.” Nina sipped her wine. “You said your parents don’t seem all that interested in your business, but what about your brother?”

“Khalid is a great man,” Rashad said. “He’s the ruler Al Soub always needed, I think. But that also means that he doesn’t have time for much other than ruling. He’s a good husband and father and a great sheikh, but he can’t also be a good brother.”

“I’m sorry,” Nina said, not for the first time that day. Once again, she fought an urge to reach for Rashad’s hand across the table.

“That’s all right. My business is my family, for now, at least.”

“I used to feel the same way about Heartbeat.” Nina smiled, thinking back to the early days of her work. “For a long time, it was just me in my apartment with a cup of instant noodles and a pair of noise-canceling headphones, sleeping at two in the morning and up again at six. Eventually, I was able to hire employees and rent office space, but even then, I didn’t have time for anything other than work — and I wasn’t interested in making time.

“Then the twins came along. I’d always wanted to be a mother, but I was still completely unprepared for how much they changed things. Suddenly, my business was less important — not unimportant, but less important. It affected me much more when Miles took his first steps and Kate said her first word than when Heartbeat reached a new demographic or received a positive review.”

“I never really wanted to be a father,” Rashad admitted. “But seeing your kids, well, perhaps I understand why other people do.”

“I’m glad.” Nina smiled. “But whether or not you have kids on your own, the point is that it’s hard to know what will be most important in your life until you find it. I would never have predicted that I’d love being a mother even more than I love being a businesswoman, but I do. I’m sure there’s family in your future, too, if that’s something you want. Or, at the very least, there’s something or someone that will matter to you more than your work.”

Rashad's dark brown eyes met Nina's, and she saw something there — hope, perhaps.

“Do you really think so?”

“I do. Love doesn't always come in the way you expect it — I always expected to get married before I became a mother, but I still love my kids more than I can say. The unexpectedness doesn't make the love any less beautiful.”

“I'm surprised that you think I could have a family at all,” Rashad said. “When we first met, you seemed to think I was an irredeemable jerk.”

“Well, either I judged you too quickly, or you've changed.” Nina shrugged. “Either way, I'm glad I've gotten to know you as more than just a jerk.”

“So am I.”

Music was still playing in the background, and as a slow song came on, Rashad sat up straight.

“Oh, this is a good one.” He got to his feet and held out a hand to Nina. “Will you dance with me?”

“What?” Nina shook her head, laughing slightly. “No. I'm not a good dancer — even though I love this song.” It was one of her favorite classic oldies.

“Come on, I'm sure you're fine.” Rashad held out his hand again. “Anyway, there's no one around, and I just told you something I haven't told anyone before. No one's going to judge. And I love this song too.”

“Fine.” Nina took his hand, feeling warmth spread up her arm from the place their

fingers brushed. “But you had plenty of warning about my dancing skills, so no being surprised when I’m not good at it.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“I’d be happy to find something you’re bad at.” Rashad winked. “It seems like you’re good at everything.”

Nina almost snorted. “Clearly, you haven’t met me.”

“I have.” One of Rashad’s hands settled on Nina’s waist, while the other gently cupped her palm. “You’re amazing, Nina. You can’t deny that.”

They began to move across the deck, the song crooning familiar lyrics from the radio, their steps light across the wood. Nina’s heart thrilled at Rashad’s words and at the undeniably romantic atmosphere, though she was careful to keep herself in check. Still, the part of Nina that believed in love, even now, shouted that Rashad liked the same music she did and that a man who could dance was deeply sexy.

“You’re quite impressive yourself,” she replied. “A lot of people would have been content to live a life of luxury in a palace, but you made your own life by following your own path. I admire that.”

“Thank you.” Rashad lifted his arm to twirl Nina and she saw the yacht, the starry night sky, and Rashad’s warm brown eyes blur by as her skirt lifted around her knees. “I wanted to apologize.”

“For what?” It was an almost perfect night. The breeze from the sea was refreshing and smelled of salt, the stars were bright, and the man holding Nina in his arms was looking down at her with such an intense expression that it was all she could do to not lift onto her tiptoes and kiss him.

“I first invited you here with the goal of taking everything,” Rashad said. “I wanted to put you out of business.”

“I know that.” Nina let Rashad dip her back, then lift her up again. “But things didn’t go that way. Instead, we decided to work together — so you have nothing to apologize for.”

“Perhaps.” They spun again. Nina was enjoying the dance so much that she wasn’t even worried about stepping on Rashad’s toes or looking silly, as she usually would have been. “But still. I want you to know that I feel badly about my intentions.”

“Rashad.” Nina pulled them both to a stop, her heart suddenly beating a little too hard in her chest. “What are we doing here, dancing like this, with you apologizing for something that never happened?”

“I thought we were sharing a lovely moment under the stars,” Rashad said, his voice low. “Do you disagree?”

“No.” Nina shook her head. “I just... It’s been a long time since I let myself... share a moment under the stars... with anyone.”

Rashad began to dance again, though it was more of a sway now. His dark eyes never left hers. He was so close that the soft smell of aftershave was all around Nina and she could think of little else beside his touch. Their surroundings dimmed as Rashad came into focus.

“Maybe it’s time for that to change,” he said, his voice deep.

“Maybe so.” Nina looking up at him, her heart still fluttering. It was clear now that Rashad did share her feelings. She wasn’t the only one who felt attraction dance through her chest when he was near, and perhaps she hadn’t imagined that he’d been

on the verge of kissing her in that closet and when he'd dropped her off at her room the night before.

Nina knew there couldn't be a future for the two of them — she and Rashad were too different, and too busy. Yet perhaps, just for one night, she could give in to the attraction she felt and let herself seize a moment under the stars. She could still protect her heart, even if she let herself feel a little tonight.

So, slowly, Nina lifted onto her toes. Rashad stopped swaying as one of his hands came to rest on the side of her face, his thumb skimming across her cheekbone and sending waves of long-forgotten sensation through Nina's body.

"Nina," he said.

"Rashad."

And then he bent his head, Nina lifted higher onto her tiptoes, and they were kissing. It was everything Nina had tried to keep herself from imagining, and more. Rashad's lips were warm and gentle on hers. His hands skimmed along her back as they kissed, drawing her closer. She became a being of sensation, wanting more, no longer thinking rationally about anything. After just a moment, Rashad pulled back and met Nina's eyes.

"Is that all right?" he asked.

"Yes." Nina's voice was breathless, and she didn't trust herself to say more.

And then they were kissing again, Rashad's lips more insistent this time. Heat pooled in Nina's belly as Rashad pressed her against the wall of the kitchen, his kisses expert and tender. For what felt like both the blink of an eye and an hour, they kissed like teenagers before Rashad's hands grew bolder in their explorations.

Nina was the kind of person who always worried — about her kids, about her business, about her never-ending to-do list — but today, in this moment, all her worries drifted away. There was nothing but her and Rashad and the way he touched her, as though she were incredibly precious. Nina never wanted this moment to end.

“Would you like to go to the bedroom?” Rashad asked, his voice low in Nina’s ear as he brushed kisses along her cheek and neck.

“Yes,” Nina said, without hesitation. A small part of her protested that she might be hurt in the morning, when the boat docked in San Diego and she and Rashad went back to business — but a larger part told her to let go, just for now. The future was uncertain, but this moment wasn’t. Nina was with a man who cared about her, who whispered her name as though it were a magic spell, who lifted her into his arms as easily as if she were made of air. There was no point in worrying about tomorrow, not when she wanted only to be closer to Rashad, to feel his hands on her, and to kiss him as though nothing else mattered.

So, Rashad carried her easily down the stairs and into his bedroom. Nina got a glimpse of a neatly made bed and an open suitcase on the floor —had Rashad never unpacked?— before he was laying her back on the bed and kissing her again as he braced over her, warm and solid and so close that Nina could hardly bear it.

Nina let go of her worries and gave herself over fully to the magic of this night, this moment, and the man she was with. Everything else could wait.

CHAPTER 14

RASHAD

Rashad woke to sunlight streaming across his face, the warmth of Nina's head on his shoulder, and the sound of a phone ringing. Bleary and more than a little annoyed at the interruption, he felt for his phone on the side table and swiped to decline the call. Luckily, the noise hadn't woken Nina.

Rashad looked down at the beautiful woman sleeping beside him. Her head rested on his shoulder, her eyes were closed, with her eyelashes splayed across her pink cheeks, and her hair was fanned across the pillow in a riot of curls. She was gorgeous.

The sight of Nina's face brought back memories from the night before, and Rashad felt an unexpected mix of desire and affection pool in his stomach. Every moment that they'd spent together, talking, playing in the ocean, kissing, had been magical, but going to bed together had topped all of that. Rashad was no stranger to nights spent with beautiful women, but it had been different with Nina. Better. Probably that was because he genuinely cared about her.

Rashad pressed a soft kiss to the top of Nina's head. Still, she slept on — perhaps she'd trained herself to sleep through interruptions so that she could get a full night of sleep with toddlers at home. Rashad wanted to stay here forever, holding Nina in his arms and remembering the night they'd spent together, but after a few minutes he reached for his phone again. He should find out who had called him, in case something was wrong at work.

The missed call was from Amira. Rashad's heart turned over. They must be close enough to San Diego that cell service was working well again, and his business

partners would be anxious for an update after several days of silence on Rashad's part. His heart ached at the thought of leaving Nina alone in bed, but there was nothing to be done. He couldn't leave the call unanswered.

As slowly and carefully as he could, Rashad eased out of bed, setting Nina's head on a pillow and tucking the sheets around her shoulders. Soon enough, the kids would wake up and Nina would, too, but for now, he'd let her sleep.

Rashad grabbed the clothes he'd shed the night before, not wanting to wake Nina by rummaging around in his suitcase, and slipped into the bathroom. There, he freshened up before going on deck to return Amira's call.

It was still early. The sunlight that had woken him must have been the first rays of the sunrise because, even now, the sun was just beginning to tinge the sky pink and gold as it rose over the horizon. Rashad leaned against the railing and called Amira back.

She picked up on the first ring.

"Rashad?"

"Hello, Amira." Rashad adjusted the phone to his other ear and gazed out over the ocean. Usually, he loved talking to his business partners — it was satisfying to plan next steps and go over past successes. Today, though, he just wanted this call to end so that he could slip back into bed with Nina and be with her when she woke up.

"I'm glad you decided to call us back." There was an unexpected edge in Amira's voice.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's just been a few days since we've heard from you," Abdul's voice came on the

line. “We had a meeting today with outside investors, and they wanted to know where the CEO was and how the expansion into the US market is going. We had to dance around the questions.”

“I should have kept in better touch.” Rashad rubbed his temples, the stress of running a business already coming back. “I apologize, but I’m happy to update you now.”

“Well, as long as you’ve secured the US market for us, all else can be forgiven,” Amira said. Her voice had lost a bit of its edge. “How’s your progress with the American, Ms. Kendrick?”

Rashad hesitated. Yesterday, offering to work with Nina had felt like the perfect solution for everyone, but in the warm light of day, he was less convinced. Still, he didn’t want to put Nina out of business — and he truly believed that collaborating could help them both. Hopefully, his investors felt the same way.

“I have good news on that front,” Rashad said in as confident a tone as he could. “We’ve been able to reach a preliminary agreement, although there are still details to be worked out, of course.”

“Of course.” Amira sounded pleased. “Tell us what you were able to agree on thus far.”

“Well, Nina’s company, Heartbeat, is truly extraordinary,” Rashad said. “She and I have spoken, and we agree that working together to improve both our businesses is the best way forward. Heartbeat can focus on low-income communities that need affordable healthcare support, while Health Trackr can work on partnerships with businesses and hospitals. We can form a joint front for advertising and some business decisions.”

“I’m not sure I’m understanding you correctly.” Abdul, usually the more flexible and

free-thinking of the two, didn't sound pleased at all. "Are you saying that both Health Trackr and Heartbeat will exist in the US market simultaneously? And that you don't plan to do anything to ensure Health Trackr's dominance?"

"That's what I'm saying," Rashad confirmed. "Although there is a bit more nuance to it. The more I spoke with Nina, the more I realized that there's a place for both companies in the US market. By working together, we can ensure that?—"

"Rashad." Amira cut him off. He could imagine the pained look on her face across the distance that separated them. "I'm going to stop you right there. I'm not sure what happened during the last few days between you and Ms. Kendrick, but I can assure you that a partnership between your companies isn't going to work. If you want to buy Heartbeat, fine — we can even offer a higher price than usual if you feel some concessions are necessary. If you want to put Heartbeat out of business, fine. But collaborating isn't on the table."

"Why not?" Rashad asked. In that moment, he realized that he sounded more like an overtired preschooler than a businessman, but he couldn't help himself. This was important. "Maybe it's time to update our approach. At first, the only way to make sure Health Trackr succeeded was to put every competitor out of business, but that isn't the case now. Even if we have a slightly smaller market share, perhaps it's better to collaborate with worthy allies."

"You don't even sound like yourself." Abdul's voice was just as upset as Amira's. "The goal has always been to ensure that Health Trackr is the foremost healthcare app in any market. Working with the competition doesn't build towards that goal."

"It's true." Rashad could almost hear Amira shaking her head. "What provisions do you have in place to ensure that Health Trackr succeeds in this environment? What if Heartbeat retains its place as the foremost app in the US — which is likely, since it's the existing one? And worse, you mentioned that some business decisions would be

made jointly. Are you really willing to hand partial control of the company you've taken years to build to a rival — a rival who purposefully prices her app too low?"

Rashad froze, his hand on the railing, the phone near his ear. Perhaps his business partners were right. He had let himself be distracted from years of hard work by a wonderful weekend with a beautiful woman and a pair of cute kids. Rashad had always put Health Trackr first. Now, he was on the verge of making a business decision that wasn't about business at all — it was about how he felt. How he felt about Nina. How he felt about himself.

"Perhaps there are some things I didn't fully consider," Rashad said as diplomatically as he could. "Let me speak with Nina and make sure that the agreement we make won't require Health Trackr to give too much up."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, then Amira spoke again. "Rashad, we can't sign off on a partnership between you and Ms. Kendrick at all — not unless you give us some concrete proof that working together is the best and only way forward. Please take a little time. Be sure you're making the right decision here."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Rashad felt like one of the twins again. He sighed. “Of course. Thank you both.”

“Call us back by this evening with an update, please,” Abdul said. The “please” was there, but it was clear that he wasn’t making a request. Amira and Abdul let Rashad handle most business decisions, because they trusted him, but at the end of the day, they were majority investors and could pump the brakes on anything they felt was a mistake.

Clearly, they felt that working with Nina was a mistake.

“I will.” Rashad hung up, slipped his phone into his pocket, and gripped the yacht’s railing with both hands. They were almost back to San Diego now; he could see the skyline in the distance. Soon, the real world would come crashing in, whether he was ready or not.

Rashad’s business partners had made a good point. More than one. He was rushing into a partnership with Nina simply because he didn’t want to hurt her, not because it would benefit his company in any way. In fact, working with Nina would cost Health Trackr, as it would be more difficult to dominate the market with a competitor at his side.

Over the last few days, Rashad had begun to feel that his work might not be as important as he thought it was. Maybe there were other things that mattered more — a sticky preschooler’s hand in his as they played hide-and-seek together. Nina’s smile as she lifted onto her tiptoes to kiss him. Laughing around a dinner table at some comment Kate or Miles had made. Twirling Nina across the deck of the yacht as an old song played over the radio.

Yet Rashad needed to think clearly about this. He couldn't let himself make such an important decision just because he'd gotten a glimpse into family life the last few days — and liked it more than he'd expected.

He didn't want to hurt Nina. He'd wanted to show her that there was more to him than just a ruthless businessman — yet perhaps there wasn't actually more to him. Perhaps Rashad really was a ruthless businessman and nothing else. At the end of the day, Health Trackr was what mattered most to Rashad and always would. He'd given years of his life and all his energy to make Health Trackr a success, and Abdul and Amira were right: he couldn't give that up — for anything or anyone.

Not even for Nina.

Rashad's heart ached. Part of him wanted to toss his phone in the ocean and run back to his room, where Nina still slept. He wanted to find a way to work with her, instead of against her. He wanted to spend more time with her and the twins, perhaps purchase a house here in San Diego so that he could be near her for part of the year. He wanted to kiss her until he forgot everything else. He wanted to believe what Nina had said last night, about how eventually something or someone would come along who mattered more than his business.

Yet Rashad knew he couldn't do that. He needed to be strong. He needed to focus on Health Trackr, not on the woman who made his heart beat faster and his head spin.

Even if he decided to risk his company and his partnership with Abdul and Amira for Nina, there was no guarantee that things would turn out between them. In all likelihood, Nina had considered their night together to be nothing more than a momentary indiscretion or a fun vacation fling. There was no reason to believe she'd want him in her life as anything more than a business partner.

Rashad's hands tightened on the railing. He couldn't risk everything for Nina, not

when he didn't even know how she felt about him. He'd go back to Al Soub. He'd speak with Abdul and Amira and find another way forward — perhaps a buyout of Heartbeat. It wasn't what Rashad wanted, but it was the only acceptable option.

Rashad's heart ached as he watched the sun lift over the horizon. The sky faded from pink to baby blue, then to the brighter blue of daytime, and still, he stood and watched, motionless. It was time for him to say goodbye to Nina, to Miles, to Kate, to the beautiful weekend they'd spent together in which Rashad had felt like he could be more than the CEO of Health Trackr. It was time to go back to real life.

CHAPTER 15

NINA

Nina woke alone in Rashad's bed. For a moment, she wasn't sure where she was or why there weren't small feet in her face, but then memories of the night before came back. She smiled as one hand lifted automatically to her lips, her fingertips brushing the soft skin in memory of Rashad's kisses. It wasn't like Nina at all to spend the night with someone she'd just met a few days ago, but it felt like she'd known Rashad much longer. Already, she'd shared with him things that she rarely shared with anyone, and it seemed he'd done the same. Perhaps, their night together was the beginning of something wonderful.

It was too early to think about a future with Rashad, but Nina couldn't help feeling hopeful. Ever since her ex had walked out on her when she'd found out she was pregnant, she'd kept her heart closed to everyone but her kids and her mother. Nina had been unwilling to consider any kind of serious relationship, not when it could too easily lead to another broken heart for her and her children. Yet with Rashad, she felt different. He seemed to genuinely care about her as well as the twins and maybe, just maybe, there would be a future for them together. Rashad could visit them in San Diego, or they could meet in the middle for a romantic weekend.

Nina didn't have any big expectations that Rashad would drop everything to join her little family, but a casual relationship based on mutual admiration that could eventually lead to something more — well, that didn't sound too bad. Perhaps it was time to set aside her fears and open her heart again. Perhaps, instead of being a fleeting moment seized from the velvety night air, last night would be the beginning of something.

At the very least, Nina was looking forward to returning to land and getting started on her and Rashad's collaborative business plans. As well as benefiting her company, more time with Rashad would give her an opportunity to sort out her own feelings — and learn more about his.

Nina laughed under her breath. Here she was, thinking about the future, when she should just be enjoying the last morning on the yacht. They would arrive at the San Diego harbor soon, but there should be time for one more shared breakfast and perhaps a game of hide-and-seek. Maybe this time, she and Rashad would actually share a kiss if they hid in the same spot.

Nina reached for her phone. It was still early, just after seven thirty. She slipped out of bed, dressed quickly in the sundress she'd worn the day before, and padded down the hallway to the room she'd shared with Miles and Kate the last few nights. Both twins were still sleeping, facing each other, wispy blond hair unfurled across their pillows. Nina watched them sleep for a moment, her heart filling with love for her little ones, before she quietly found a change of clothes and her toiletries bag. After freshening up in the bathroom, she climbed the stairs to the deck, hoping to find Rashad and a cup of coffee, not necessarily in that order.

She found Rashad first. He was standing by the railing, looking out over the ocean. Nina paused to look at him. He was in the same outfit as the day before, but he looked as handsome as ever despite sleep-rumpled hair and yesterday's clothes. Perhaps he even looked more handsome for having dropped some of his put-together,

professional façade.

Nina took in Rashad's wide shoulders and confident stance, the way his dark hair lifted slightly in the breeze, and the muscles easily visible through his shirt. She saw his hands, resting gently on the railing, and remembered how those hands had felt on her waist and in her hair. Then she crossed the deck to stand beside him.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Nina." Rashad looked down at her, his expression unreadable. "I hope you slept well."

"I certainly did." Nina grinned. "Did you? You weren't there when I woke up."

"Sorry. I had to take a call." Rashad's gaze lifted back to the horizon. It felt a little like a dismissal.

"That's fine. Is everything okay?" Nina bit her lip.

"Yes."

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Something seemed off about Rashad this morning, but Nina wasn't entirely certain what it was. His expression was closed off and his posture was a little different. Perhaps he regretted the night they'd spent together. Nina's stomach clenched at the thought, but she reminded herself not to jump to conclusions.

"It's a beautiful morning, isn't it?" She set her hands on the railing beside his. Their little fingers were only a few inches apart, and she was tempted to slide her hand closer to his, but she hesitated.

"It is." Rashad turned to her, his expression still unreadable. "Nina, I think we should talk business."

"Oh!" Nina shouldn't have been surprised — they were here to talk business, after all. Yet Rashad had seemed hesitant to talk about work the last few days, and she'd thought that, after their night together, he'd be even less interested. This was the opposite. "Of course. Shall we go to the meeting room?"

"No, this won't take long." Rashad took his hands off the railing and folded them. "Listen, Nina, I know we had a handshake agreement to become partners instead of competitors, but it looks like I won't be able to honor that. I'm sorry."

Nina's stomach did a backflip. She lifted her eyes to Rashad's, searching for any sign that she'd misunderstood or that he'd misspoken. He couldn't possibly be backing out of their deal, not after the night they'd spent together.

Or maybe this was about the night they'd spent together. Maybe Rashad, who seemed to have never had a real relationship or shared real closeness with anyone, was scared

of the intimacy he and Nina had shared and was willing to sabotage their agreement to avoid awkwardness.

“Listen,” Nina said in the calming tone she used to talk her three-year-olds down. “If this is about last night, let me reassure you that just because we slept together, it doesn’t mean that our business relationship has to change. I’ll still treat you as an equal, and I hope you’ll do the same. In fact, I’ve been thinking about a few ideas for our work together. Perhaps Heartbeat could become a sort of charitable wing of Health Trackr — thatway, your business model and profits won’t be endangered, and Heartbeat can expand to other countries where you work. We could?—”

But Rashad raised his hand, palm out, in a stop gesture. He looked a little pained now.

“Nina, I appreciate that, but things aren’t going to work out for us as business partners. Or as partners of any kind.”

Nina took an involuntary step back. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve had a wonderful weekend with you, but that doesn’t mean that there’s anything between us. It would hurt Health Trackr to partner with you. Beyond that, I just don’t see a future for us. I truly apologize if I led you to believe otherwise.”

“Rashad, let’s talk about this.” Nina stayed calm, though she had to clasp her hands to keep them from shaking. “I know that?—”

“I’m sorry,” Rashad said again. He was still looking at her, but his dark eyes were devoid of affection now. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

Tears sprung to Nina’s eyes as the enormity of what he was saying hit her, but she held them back. There was no way she was going to cry in front of Rashad — not now. He’d let her believe that they had, if not a future together, at least a possibility

for a good working relationship. Now, Heartbeat would be in danger: if Rashad wasn't working with her, that meant he was working against her. More than that, Nina had let herself begin to trust this man. Her kids cared about him, too.

Any hope that Rashad might change his mind burst as he broke their eye contact, focusing instead on the waves in the middle distance.

None of that mattered now. Rashad was clear that he didn't want anything else to do with her, her business, or the twins. Nina needed to stay strong while he was still here, looking so handsome and so ruthless and so detached.

"You did lead me to believe that we'd be able to work together," Nina said. Her voice broke, but only a little. "You told me that we'd be partners, but I understand now why you didn't want to get into details while we were here. I imagine you never intended to go through with our agreement. I suppose our night together was just another tactic."

She looked away from him, out over the ocean. Usually, she found the ocean calming, with its cerulean waters and the way it stretched as far as the eye could see, but today it looked unsettling. Too much was hidden beneath the placid surface.

"Nina—"

It was her turn to interrupt Rashad. "Just tell me what this means for Heartbeat. Will you be trying to buy us out, or outcompete us?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I can promise you that I will be as fair as possible."

Nina scoffed. "Sure, because your word means a lot to me at this point. Goodbye, Rashad."

She turned on her heel and walked, slowly and with as much dignity as she could, towards the cabin where her children slept. This was a mess. Clearly, Rashad was planning to take Heartbeat down, one way or another, even if he didn't have the decency to admit it now. The only question was when he would come for her.

Nina had made a terrible mistake by allowing herself to grow fond of Rashad. She wouldn't make that mistake again. Now she needed to protect her children, her company, and her own heart as best as she could.

Even if it felt too late to shield any of them.

CHAPTER 16

RASHAD

Rashad would never forget the look of hurt and betrayal in Nina's eyes when he told her that there wasn't a future for them. He was sure he'd dream for years to come of the way her eyes had widened as she'd stumbled back. In every memory, in every dream, her expression would haunt him as much as the betrayals he'd faced from his family.

Dozens of times before, Rashad had sat down across from business rivals and told them that it was over — that he was buying their company, or that he'd outcompeted them. He'd seen shock and hurt before, but it had never been like this. This time, it was personal.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Rashad couldn't blame Nina for that. He'd let her believe that they could work together — he'd slept with her, for goodness' sake. Rashad wasn't sure he'd ever forgive himself for that. He should never have allowed himself to grow close to Nina, not when she was his competition. He should have kept a level head and focused on business instead of on the way her blond curls shone in the sun and the way she laughed when one of her kids did something silly. Now, because he had let himself believe in a different kind of future, he'd hurt them both.

It was too late now. Nina was walking away across the deck, her back straight, her steps slow and even. Rashad got the impression that she was much more hurt than she was willing to let on, but he wasn't about to take what power she had from her.

Rashad wanted to rush across the deck to Nina, spin her around, and take her in his arms. He wanted to tell her that he was willing to risk his company and his business partners to have another chance with her. He wanted to tell her that their night together had meant something, even if he wasn't yet ready to put into words just what.

Yet he couldn't do it. What he'd said to Nina had been true — they'd shared a wonderful weekend, but that didn't mean he could give up everything. If Rashad had continued down the path he'd been on, partnering with Nina and exploring a relationship with her, it was only a matter of time before the company he'd poured his whole life into suffered. Even if there was a way to ensure that partnering with Heartbeat didn't harm Health Trackr, Rashad knew he wouldn't be able to pour everything into work if he had a woman like Nina in his life. And it wasn't just Nina, either — he cared about her kids, too. If he allowed himself to become a part of their little family, he would never care about his work as much again. He couldn't let that

happen.

So, he turned away from Nina's retreating form. His hands went to the railing again, squeezing until his knuckles turned white. For a long moment, he stood there, still at war with himself. It took everything he had to not run after Nina and beg her to forget what he'd said.

But the longer he watched the water, the more control he was able to regain. After a few minutes, he released the railing and walked, slowly and calmly, up to the kitchen. He set out a breakfast spread of cereal and fruit on the dining table and made himself a coffee. As upset as Nina was with him, she'd need to bring the kids up for breakfast. Then, Rashad would have a chance to soften his words from earlier, at least a little.

He still couldn't work with her, and he still couldn't be in a relationship with her, but he could at least tell Nina how much this time together had meant to him. He could promise her, once again, that he would do all he could not to hurt her or her company. And he could say a proper goodbye to Nina and the twins. A goodbye worthy of the future they could never have.

Rashad sipped his coffee leaning against the outside wall of the kitchen. Last night, he'd pressed Nina against this wall as he'd kissed her, and in that moment, nothing had mattered as much as her. If his business partners had called right then, he wouldn't have answered. If she'd asked him to sign a paper giving his company to her, he probably would have. That thought scared him and reaffirmed that he'd made the right decision.

Rashad finished his coffee, washed the cup, and set it on the draining board. Then he returned to his position, waiting. The San Diego skyline drew closer until Rashad could practically count the windows on the buildings.

Nina isn't coming. The realization hit him hard. He wasn't going to see her again until they disembarked, and even then, he might not get a chance to talk to her.

Rashad forced himself to take a deep breath. Maybe this was for the best. If he talked to Nina, his resolve might waver, leaving them both in a precarious situation. If Nina never wanted to speak to him again, Rashad would just have to live with that.

The captain eased the yacht towards the harbor as Rashad went downstairs. When they arrived, he helped dock the yacht to the pier, then waited. After a few minutes, Nina emerged from the depths of the boat. She looked very similar to how she had on the pier the first day, when she'd hurried along, disheveled, bags draped over her shoulders and one of her kids' hands in each of hers. Where she'd looked wary the first day, though, she looked resolved now.

Miles was eating a granola bar, which explained why they hadn't needed to come for breakfast, and Kate was clutching a teddy bear under her arm. Rashad stepped back so that the trio wouldn't be able to see him. He couldn't very well ambush Nina now, when she was clearly in a hurry to be away from him.

"Can't we say goodbye to Rashad?" Kate whined.

"No, honey." Nina smiled down at her daughter, though Rashad could make out the hurt in her eyes even from a distance. "Rashad is very busy, and so are we. You have preschool today — aren't you excited for that?"

"I want to say goodbye to Rashad," Kate whined again. She stopped in her tracks and looked around; her blue eyes were teary. "He's my friend."

"We'll talk about Rashad when we get home," Nina said. Although she was clearly upset, she was still kind to her daughter — and she clearly hadn't said anything negative about Rashad. "He told me to say goodbye from him."

“I want to say goodbye, too,” Miles said, adding his own whine to his sister’s. Rashad considered emerging from the wall he’d hidden himself behind to say goodbye, but it seemed better not to. It would only make things harder — and it might be confusing for the kids.

“How about we make Rashad a beautiful thank-you card when we get home?” Nina suggested. “We can draw lots of nice things that he’d like, to decorate the card.”

“Like unicorns?” Kate asked, perking up a little. “And cows?”

“Of course.” Nina smiled again.

“And footballs and soccer balls?” Miles added.

“You know it.” Gently, Nina led her kids onto the pier. “What else should we draw?”

“Penguins!” Kate suggested. They quietly chattered about the card until they were out of earshot. Rashad watched until the trio disappeared into the parking lot, then went to get his own bags. It was time to return to Al Soub — immediately.

The twins’ sadness at not saying goodbye was another sign that Rashad had made a terrible mistake. Not only had he hurt Nina, but he’d hurt her kids, too. That was unforgivable.

Yet if he had allowed himself to grow even closer to the family, the ending would have been far worse. Either Rashad would have hurt them eventually, or his work would have suffered. Plus, it wasn’t like he would have been a good father figure to them. Rashad had never experienced unconditional love from his parents, so there was no way he could be a good father himself.

No, it was better this way. The twins would be sad for a day or two, Nina might be

upset for a bit longer, but eventually, they would all move on. Rashad would, too. He'd return to his longworking hours, keeping his memories of family life with the Kendricks to himself.

If Rashad's heart ached a little as he strode down the pier to hail a taxi to the private airport where his plane waited, he didn't let himself dwell on that. It wasn't like he could change anything. He needed to work — not wish he were holding hands with Nina and walking home with her and her kids — so, instead of chasing after her, he dialed the number of his assistant, Hameed. As he walked, he filled Hameed in on the events of the weekend, leaving out all personal details and focusing on business. Then he asked his assistant to arrange a meeting with his business partners as soon as he landed.

Rashad spent the flight back to Al Soub working. Although he'd tried to put in a few hours each day while on the yacht, he'd fallen behind on several important tasks while spending time with Nina and the twins. Now, he drank strong Al Soubi coffee, made by the helpful flight attendant, and worked on spreadsheets and analyses until his eyes blurred.

Usually, diving into work was enough to distract Rashad from whatever might be bothering him, whether that was difficulties in his family, worries about Health Trackr's future, or anything else. Yet today, Rashad found himself repeatedly distracted by thoughts of Nina. He wanted to know how she was, what she was doing now, and if she still felt as betrayed as she had on the yacht. Hopefully, she would dive into her own work and soon forget all about her time with him.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

When the plane touched down on Al Soubi soil, Rashad disembarked quickly. The hot, dry air of his native country enveloped him like an unwelcome hug from a tolerated relative. Rashad should have felt some sense of homecoming, but he didn't. There were things he appreciated about Al Soub, and it was where he'd grown up, but his time with Nina had shown him that Al Soub wasn't his home in the strictest sense of the word. Home was about people more than a place, people who were welcoming and made you feel comfortable — as Nina did for her twins, and they did for her. Rashad didn't have people like that here, so it might never feel like his home.

From the airport, it was a direct drive to the palace, where Rashad went to his rooms to shower and freshen up. He was hungry, too, so he rang for a tray of food, smiling to himself as he thought of the many meals he'd prepared with Nina. By the time he was finished with his shower and dressed in a fresh suit, the food had arrived, and Rashad sat down to eat.

He was immediately struck by the silence. The only sound was his fork scraping against his plate — there was no chatter of preschooler conversation, no insights from Nina, no slap of waves or caw of seagulls. Rashad looked around his rooms and felt more alone than he had in years. He'd always kept his rooms simple and clean, but now, they looked empty more than anything else. There were no pictures on the walls, no colorful rugs, and no sign of anyone living here.

In that moment, Rashad realized how much he'd given up by walking away from Nina. They hadn't known each other for very long, but she'd represented a chance: a chance for him to be a better man and a different kind of businessman. A chance at happiness. A chance at a life that was loud and colorful and full of love.

Or maybe not. Maybe Nina had seen their weekend as a business meeting with a little extra fun, not as the start of a potential relationship.

Either way, it didn't matter. Rashad was gone from Nina's life — he had to be. He set down his fork, his food still half eaten, and stood, calling Abdul. It was time to throw himself back into his work, which meant a meeting with his business partners to discuss next steps into the US market. There was no more time for sentimentality.

CHAPTER 17

NINA

“Mommy,” Miles said, his tone bordering on wheedling, “when are we gonna see Rashad again?”

“Yeah,” Kate asked, looking up from the puzzle she'd been working on with pictures of zoo animals on it, “when are we gonna see him?”

Nina took a deep breath, trying her best to maintain her composure. She was sitting with her kids at the dining table on a rainy Thursday evening, several days after leaving Rashad's yacht. Her laptop was open in front of her so that she could do a little work, while Kate fitted chunky puzzle pieces together and Miles played with a miniature basketball hoop. The rare San Diego rain, which left streaks down the window and cast the scene outside in muted gray, matched Nina's mood perfectly.

“Honey,” Nina said, addressing both her kids with the endearment, “we talked about this, remember? We had such a fun weekend with Rashad, but he doesn't live near here, which means we can't see him.”

“But he got our card, right?” Miles asked.

Nina hesitated. She didn't like lying to her kids, but the truth was that she hadn't even sent the card. It was sitting in its envelope in a shoebox in her closet. Even if Rashad wanted to hear from the twins, he didn't deserve the sweet card they'd made — and Nina wasn't going to reestablish contact. She had half a mind to call Rashad and yell at him for hurting the twins like this, but even that would be too much.

"I'm sure he did," she said. If only the twins were a little older, she might be able to explain some of the intricacies of what had happened with Rashad, but they were very young, and even if she tried, they wouldn't understand — even Nina herself still struggled to understand Rashad's behavior. A white lie was better.

"Maybe we can visit him," Kate suggested, her blue eyes lighting up at the thought. "Does he live near Grandma?"

"No, honey. It takes an hour to drive to Grandma's house, but to visit Rashad, we'd have to fly on a plane for more than twelve hours."

"Wow." Miles's eyes lit up now. "A plane?" He'd been obsessed with sports the last few months, but Nina could see his interest shifting towards vehicles. Driving Rashad's yacht had apparently sparked his curiosity about things that go.

"How about we visit Grandma this weekend?" Nina said, hoping to change the subject.

This wasn't the first time her kids had asked about Rashad in the last few days. In fact, the questions had been almost constant as Miles and Kate had inquired about where Rashad was, if he was coming over to play, and if he liked their card. Nina tried her best to be patient with all the questions. After all, it was clear that her children had really liked Rashad, which she could understand, and she didn't want them to face the same hurt she was struggling with.

Still, it was difficult to talk about Rashad without feeling teary, which meant that Nina had been feeling very teary this week.

“Grandma!” Kate wiggled in her seat excitedly. “I pack my bag?”

“Not yet, honey. Today is Thursday, and we’ll go on Saturday.”

“Oh.” Kate stuck out her lip. “Okay.”

“Rashad can come to Grandma’s!” Miles suggested. Nina almost dropped her head onto the table. They’d been so close to moving on to a different topic.

“Remember, he lives far away,” she said gently. “Now, who’s interested in a special dinner? How about some make-your-own pizza?”

“Yay!” both kids cheered.

“Great. Clean up your toys from the table, and I’ll get everything ready.”

As the kids gathered their puzzle and basketball hoop into their arms and carried them off towards the playroom, probably to dump them in a heap despite Nina’s recurring request to put them back in the toy chest, Nina got to her feet and rested her hands on the kitchen counter, feeling a little lightheaded. If only she hadn’t brought her kids on the yacht, perhaps this would be easier.

Or perhaps not. Beyond the twins’ sadness at not seeing Rashad, Nina was hurt, too. She wasn’t sad, exactly — just angry. Rashad had promised her a partnership. He’d spent the night with her. He’d played with her kids. He’d shared deep conversations with her and danced with her under the starlight. And then, at the last minute, he’d yanked the rug out from under her.

He was almost as bad as the twins' father, Nina's ex.

Nina pushed that thought away. It was a completely different situation — she and Rashad had known each other only for a weekend, even if she'd let herself hope it might lead to something more. Though in some way, this felt worse — her ex had walked away from the idea of a family with Nina, but Rashad had walked away from her sweet children.

“Mommy, dinnertime!” Kate ran back into the kitchen, her pigtails bouncing as she went.

“Great!” Nina scooped her daughter up and set her on the counter. “Do you want to help me make the dough?”

“Yay!”

Miles arrived a minute later and was put to work slicing mushrooms and olives with his safety knife. Nina put on some of her favorite oldies and danced with each of her children as they worked, trying to keep memories of cooking alongside Rashad at bay. They'd only cooked together a few times, yet Nina wouldn't forget anytime soon how he'd admired her children's palates and cooking skills — and teased Nina for always following a recipe.

That weekend, they went to visit Nina's mother, Amy. It was a fun weekend with lots of Grandma time for the kids. Nina tried to enjoy herself, too, but she felt tired. She'd always worked a lot, and she'd always spent a lot of time playing with the kids, but the aftermath of her weekend with Rashad was draining in another way.

After putting the kids to bed on Saturday night, Nina's mother came into the room Nina was using with two mugs of chamomile tea.

"Hey, Mom." Nina tucked her legs beneath her and closed her laptop, instantly feeling like a teenager again in her mother's presence. Being in her childhood bedroom, which was still decorated with posters of Nina's favorite singers and a trophy she'd won in a tenth-grade Science Bowl, certainly didn't help matters.

"Hi, honey." Amy handed her a mug and sat at the end of the bed. "I just wanted you to know that I'm ready to listen."

"Listen to what?" Nina asked, playing for time. Amy chuckled.

"Honey, I'm your mother. You don't have to tell me what's wrong, but you can't pretend that everything's fine. I see you. Something's up."

Nina sighed. "It's been a bit of a difficult time at work." There was no need to get into her mess of a personal life right now. "There's another company similar to mine planning to move into the US market. It seemed like we'd be able to work together, but now I think they'll try to take over by force."

"Hmm." Amy sipped her tea. She still looked like the same woman who'd raised Nina, who had cut paper dolls with her and helped her put on nail polish and held her while they both cried about Aunt Katherine, Amy's sister. "Well, if that's really the problem, I'm sure you can handle it. You're a great businesswoman — you've made me proud. Aunt Katherine would be proud, too."

"What do you mean, if that really is the problem?" Nina asked.

"Again, I'm your mother. I've seen you stressed about work, and it doesn't look like this. You look as sad as when Ricky Jenson stood you up for prom, sophomore year.

Sadder, maybe. This feels personal.”

Nina thought of Rashad’s inscrutable expression as he’d told her that they would never be partners, business or otherwise. That had certainly felt personal, but she wasn’t ready to share that particular heartbreak with her mother. After all, Nina had been silly. She’d known Rashad’s reputation for being ruthless and conniving, and she’d still let herself fall for him and his kind words.

“It’s just business,” Nina said instead. Perhaps, in a few months, when Rashad was no more than a memory and she’d dealt with whatever he was going to do to put Heartbeat out of business, she’d be ready to talk to her mother about what had happened. Or maybe she wouldn’t.

“All right, honey.” Amy squeezed Nina’s shoulder. “But if you need some extra help this week, I could come back to San Diego with you to watch the kids and spend a little time together.”

Nina nodded. “That would be great, thanks, Mom. My regular babysitter would be relieved to have a little time off with finals coming up.”

“It’s a plan, then.” Amy drained her tea and got to her feet. “Good night, honey. I’ll see you in the morning.”

That week, Nina was beyond grateful to have her mother home with her. Even though Nina was a mother herself now, she still needed her own mom — and as it turned out, now more than ever, as she started to come down with the flu at the end of the week.

Work was normal, with no word from Rashad yet, though Nina still worried about what he had planned. Yet she felt increasingly tired as the week went on. Saturday morning, she burst into tears when she knocked over a glass. Then, Sunday afternoon, the smell of the kids’ peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches made her stomach turn.

Nina saw her mother watching her, but neither of them said anything.

Monday, Amy should have gone home, but she didn't. Nina should have gotten her period, but she didn't.

Tuesday, Nina stopped at the drugstore on the way home from work and bought a pregnancy test.

She wanted to believe that it would be negative. It wasn't that she didn't want more kids — Nina loved the twins more than anything, and with a good partner by her side, she'd be happy to have several more. Yet the thought of being pregnant with Rashad's baby, after what he'd done, was difficult to come to terms with. It was possible that Nina's period was just late and that she had the flu, but Nina remembered how she'd felt when pregnant with the twins, and this was eerily similar.

Nina's mother was playing with the twins in the living room when Nina got home. She smiled at her daughter as Miles and Kate ran to her and leaped into her arms. Nina twirled them around, then set them on the ground as dizziness overwhelmed her.

"Give me a few minutes to wash up, then we can play a game," she told the twins. Amy watched her closely as Nina headed into the bathroom, though she didn't say anything.

Alone in the bathroom, Nina unwrapped the test she'd bought, her hands shaking. She hadn't taken a pregnancy test since the day she'd found out she was expecting the twins, but she remembered the drill. A few minutes later, the test was sitting on the bathroom counter as Nina set a timer on her phone and leaned against the bathtub.

What if she was pregnant? It would be hard to balance a baby with the twins and her work, even harder without a partner, and almost impossible with Rashad as the father when he was going to do all he could to put her out of business. Yet some part of

Nina remembered the way it had felt to hold the twins as babies, with their little starfish hands and their chubby cheeks. She'd loved being a mother to babies — she'd just hoped that, if she had another one, she'd have a partner by her side.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

Nina's heart raced as the timer on her phone beeped. Her hands shaking slightly, she swiped the alarm off and reached for the pregnancy test on the counter. Even before she flipped it over, Nina knew what the answer would be — after all, she'd been tired, moody, and dizzy over the last few days, and her period was late.

What Nina didn't expect was the sudden, irrepressible rush of joy she felt when she saw that the test was positive. While walking to the store, buying the test, and taking it, she'd thought only of the difficulties of being a single mother. Yet now, seeing this first small sign from her new baby, Nina could only remember the good parts of motherhood. She thought of the feeling of a toddler sleeping, heavy and warm, in her arms and the way a baby gazed up her at, blinking and smiling. Miles and Kate would be wonderful older siblings — they were always looking at babies at the park and asking about them.

Nina was going to be a mother for a third time, and although it wouldn't be easy, she was already looking forward to meeting her little one. One of her hands drifted to her stomach, skating along the still-flat surface as though she were touching the baby inside. She was pregnant. She was going to have a baby.

Rashad's baby.

“Mommy?” There was a knock on the door. “I picked a game!”

“Good job, Miles,” Nina called back. Her voice was a little choked with emotion, which she remembered from her first pregnancy, too. Nina had cried at the drop of a hat all through her first trimester. “I'll be out in a second.”

There was another flurry of footsteps, and Nina heard her mother's voice. "Miles, come on, give your mother a little privacy."

Nina almost laughed at the thought of privacy. With the twins and her business, she barely had a moment to herself unless her mother or Amanda was babysitting. Adding another baby to the mix would mean even less time.

Although, perhaps Rashad would put her out of business, and she would end up being at home more than she expected.

The thought of Rashad brought a new problem flooding back. This baby was Rashad's child as much as it was hers. Yet Nina couldn't imagine a scenario in which Rashad would be an enthusiastic co-parent, no matter how sweet he'd been with the twins on the yacht. No, Rashad probably wouldn't want anything to do with this baby — and Nina wasn't sure she'd want him in her life even if he did want a relationship with their child. It would be incredibly awkward to share custody with a business rival who had broken her heart, and her kids'.

For a moment, Nina considered not telling Rashad about the baby at all. It would be easier. Without Rashad in the picture, Nina could focus on impending motherhood, her twins, and her business without any further complications. Yet she dismissed the idea quickly. Rashad had betrayed her and broken her heart, but this was still his baby, and he deserved to know that he was going to be a father.

Nina would make it clear to him that she didn't want him involved in the baby's life or in hers, and Rashad would likely accept that without complaint. Then Nina could move on, assured that she'd done the right thing.

"Mommy!" This time, it was Kate's young voice calling through the door. "Grandma made cookies!"

“That’s great.” Nina placed the pregnancy test in a drawer, wrapped in toilet paper so that her kids wouldn’t see it, and splashed a little water on her face. The woman looking back at her from the mirror seemed tired, so Nina took a deep breath and smiled at herself. This baby would complicate things, but a new baby was only good news.

“Are you coming out?” Kate called.

“I am.” Nina nodded at her reflection, then turned and opened the door. “Hi, honey.”

“Mommy!” Kate lifted her arms to be picked up and, despite her tiredness, Nina didn’t hesitate to scoop her child up.

“So, what game are we playing?” Nina asked as she carried her daughter into the living room, Kate’s small legs wrapped around her like a monkey’s arms.

“Sorry!” Kate said. “Like with Rashad.”

“I can’t wait,” Nina said. In the living room, Amy and Miles had set up the game on the coffee table. Fresh chocolate-chip cookies sat waiting beside the game, the smell reminiscent of Nina’s own childhood. As Nina set Kate down, her mother looked up at her.

“How’s everything?” she asked.

“Everything’s going to be all right.” Nina reached for a blue plastic game piece, avoiding her mother’s eyes. “Shall we play?”

Later, she’d tell her mom about the new baby and about Rashad, but for the moment, Nina was going to enjoy an evening of games with her family and try to forget about everything else.

That night, Amy offered to help the twins with their bath and bedtime routine. Nina gratefully accepted and slipped off to her room, where she took out her phone. Rashad had given her a number to contact him, back when it had seemed like they'd work together, so all she needed to do was presscall. Yet Nina hesitated. It might still be a mistake to tell Rashad about the baby. If he wanted custody or took her pregnancy as a sign of weakness in business, she wasn't sure what she'd do.

Even so, telling him was the right thing to do. Nina took a deep breath and tapped the call button. She lifted the phone to her ear as it rang. For the first few rings, there was no answer, and Nina glanced at the world clock on her phone to make sure she hadn't gotten the time zones wrong and called in the middle of the night in Al Soub. But no, it was morning there.

Finally, just as Nina was about to give up hope, someone answered. It wasn't Rashad's familiar voice on the other end, though, but an unfamiliar male one.

"You've reached the office of Rashad Al-Zayed. This is his assistant, Hameed Al-Kitabi. How may I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to Rashad, please," Nina said. She was a little thrown off — she'd expected Rashad to answer his personal line himself.

"Can I ask what this is concerning?" Hameed inquired.

"It's, um, a personal matter," Nina said. "You can tell him that this is Nina Kendrick — we met in San Diego a few weeks ago."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Mr. Al-Zayed has requested that he be contacted only in the most urgent of situations,” Hameed informed her.

“I understand that, but this is an urgent situation,” Nina told him. “Please, just connect me through to him. Rashad will want to hear this.”

Nina wasn’t sure that the last sentence was true — in fact, Rashad probably didn’t want to hear that he was about to become a father with a woman he was doing his best to put out of business. He needed to hear what Nina had to say, though.

“Just a moment.” The line clicked and Nina’s heart began to race. This was it. She was about to talk to Rashad again, to tell him that he was going to be a father. What was she even going to say? She had no idea. Perhaps she should have prepared more for this discussion.

When the line clicked back on, though, it was Rashad’s assistant again, and Nina’s heart sank.

“Mr. Al-Zayed is in a meeting now, but I can take a message. What would you like me to tell him?”

Nina hesitated. Part of her wanted to blurt out to this unfamiliar man that she was expecting Rashad’s baby — at least then it would all be over with. But that would be a mistake. Nina needed to tell Rashad about the pregnancy herself, not leave a message.

“Please tell him to call me back as soon as possible.”

“Of course. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Nina was tempted to shout that Hameed could fetch Rashad for her, but she didn't. It wasn't Hameed's fault that Rashad was an uncaring jerk, and Nina would never even have considered yelling if she wasn't swimming in pregnancy hormones.

“No, thank you.”

“All right. Goodbye.”

The line went dead, and Nina slumped back onto her bed. At least she'd tried — now it was up to Rashad to contact her.

It was only a matter of time before the phone rang and Nina had the most difficult conversation of her life.

CHAPTER 18

NINA

The phone trilled, a bright, happy sound that cut through Nina's concentration. She reached for it, her heart beginning to race as it always did when her phone went off, but she was increasingly certain that the call wasn't from Rashad. Sure enough, when Nina answered, the voice on the other end belonged to one of her freelance employees. They briefly discussed tasks for the next week, then she thanked him, hung up, and leaned back in her chair.

Two months had passed — two months with no word from Rashad. For the first few weeks after she'd left the message with Hameed, Nina had practically jumped out of

her skin each time the phone rang, scrambling to answer no matter the time or place. It was never Rashad calling, though. Eventually, Nina began to suspect that he didn't care about her enough to call her back, despite the message she'd left with Hameed about having urgent news. Maybe she should have just told Rashad's assistant that she was pregnant — although even then, there was a good chance Rashad wouldn't have returned her call.

Meanwhile, she hadn't heard from Rashad in any other way, either. He hadn't offered to buy her company, nor had Health Trackr been rolled out in the United States yet. Nina wasn't sure what Rashad was thinking, only that he would come for her company eventually, and she needed to be ready.

So, Nina had thrown herself back into work. She put in long hours, often sleeping little, to ensure that Heartbeat was as ready as it could be to withstand whatever Rashad threw at her. At the same time, Nina attended her first prenatal appointment, began buying baby clothes, and spent as much time as she could with Miles and Kate. The twins talked about Rashad less as time went on, though they still thought of him or asked Nina where he was from time to time.

Even with Amanda's help, and Nina's mother coming to visit at least once a month, everything was incredibly hectic, and Nina was overwhelmed. She had no idea how she was going to add a newborn to her busy schedule. Slowly, she began to hand over a few tasks to trusted employees with the hope that she could take at least a short maternity leave when the baby arrived in six months.

Today was the first day of Nina's second trimester. She was sitting in her desk chair at work, sipping ginger ale to calm her stomach (hopefully, she'd begin to feel better in the second trimester, as she had with her twins). It was March now, and San Diego was moving from pleasantly warm to undeniably hot.

Opening her email, Nina spotted an invitation to a networking event in a few days'

time. Networking was one task that had fallen by the wayside in the last few months, but it was time for that to change. Nina would need allies and funders when Rashad came after her. Sighing, she RSVP'd yes to the invitation. She'd have to find something to wear that would still fit over hergrowing bump — she'd dug out maternity clothes from the twins' pregnancy, but she didn't have anything particularly formal or flattering.

The next few days were spent in Nina's usual whirlwind of activity. She had her twelve-week appointment and heard the baby's heartbeat, which nearly brought her to tears. She attended a family day at the twins' preschool and applauded the small play their class put on, in which Kate played a singing tree and Miles was a caterpillar that made truck noises. She spent a few long hours fixing a bug in the app and working on a new feature that made blood-pressure tracking more accurate. Nina was so busy, in fact, that on the night of the event she threw on a purple dress that wasn't formal enough and twisted her hair into a half-up, half-down style just to keep it off her face. A little makeup later, she was as ready as she'd ever be.

Nina slipped into the twins' bedroom, where they were already sleeping. She'd arrived home in time to feed them dinner and get them into bed, but it always reassured her to see them sleeping so peacefully.

Downstairs, Amanda was sitting at the kitchen table with her books spread out in front of her.

"You look nice," she said, glancing up at Nina. Her gaze fell to Nina's stomach, but Amanda didn't say anything. Until now, Nina hadn't looked very pregnant, but it seemed that her bump was noticeable now, especially in the slightly-too-small purple dress. Hopefully, she wouldn't be fielding pregnancy questions all night.

"Thanks. Have a nice evening, and please help yourself to anything in the kitchen, as always."

“You have fun, too.” Amanda smiled.

“I doubt it — these events aren’t particularly enjoyable.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“You’re going to an event?” Amanda blushed. “Oh, you look so nice that I thought you were going on a date.”

“Not even close.” Nina lifted her hand in a wave. “See you later — and do call me if the twins need anything.”

“Will do.”

Nina made it all the way out to the car before dropping her head in her hands. She was pregnant, further from a partner than she’d been in years, tired, and completely uninterested in attending this event. How had everything gone so differently from what she’d planned?

Out of habit, Nina’s hand fell to her stomach. As tired as she was and as angry as she felt with Rashad for everything he’d done, she couldn’t regret any of it. The one night she’d spent with Rashad had led to her pregnancy and a baby she’d treasure forever. It didn’t matter if she was struggling right now, because in a few months, she’d have her baby in her arms.

It shouldn’t matter that Rashad wouldn’t be around.

With a sigh, Nina opened the door and slid into the driver’s seat. She leaned her head against the steering wheel with another wave of tiredness. Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing to beg off tonight’s event, go back inside, eat some ice cream, and go to sleep. After all, Nina felt like she’d been through a breakup, although she and Rashad had never actually been in a relationship. Wasn’t eating ice cream and watching silly movies the thing to do when your heart was broken?

Nina shook her head against the steering wheel. She was sad, yes, hurt, yes, but she shouldn't say that her heart was broken. Those were the words of a melodramatic teenager, when what she and Rashad had shared was completely different from a young infatuation.

Yet Nina's heart did ache, whether or not she was ready to admit it. She thought often of how angry she was with Rashad for betraying her as he had, but she tried not to give herself much leeway to think of how sad she was. Her time with Rashad had felt like the beginning of something truly special, but he hadn't even returned her call in months.

Taking a deep breath, Nina sat up and reached for her seatbelt, clicking it into place. It would do her no good to dwell over her heartache. She had two, soon to be three, young children to raise, on her own. That meant that she couldn't take her foot off the gas pedal, not even for a second. She couldn't go inside and indulge in ice cream and self-pity. Instead, she needed to go to the event and do all she could to save her business from Rashad's next betrayal.

Nina turned the key in the ignition and gripped the steering wheel. Before she pulled out of the parking space, though, she sent one last longing look back at her house. Her children were sleeping inside, warm and cozy and unaware of the mess with Rashad. All Nina wanted to do was be with them, or at least near them (and eat a little ice cream and cry a bit). Yet she couldn't allow herself that.

"I'll put in half an hour at this event, and then I'll come home," Nina said aloud. Then she pulled onto the street and began the drive into downtown San Diego.

Last time she'd come to an event like this, Nina had met Rashad. He'd offered to buy her a drink, which she'd declined, and to meet with her on his yacht, which she'd accepted. No accepting invitations to yachts today, Nina told herself firmly, with a small inward smile. She would have to be at her best all evening.

Nina arrived at the venue about half an hour later. Climbing out of her car, she tossed her keys to the valet with a smile and turned to the hotel. The event would be held in one of the hotel's ballrooms, with attractions including passed hors d'oeuvres and a speech by the CEO of a company that made dialysis machines. Usually, Nina might have been interested in what she had to say, but today, she just felt tired.

With another deep breath, she climbed the stairs to the hotel entrance. A waiter ushered her inside, where the ballroom was already full of familiar faces and a few newcomers. Nina made a beeline for an old associate who had partnered with Heartbeat previously on a feature that gathered user data from the company's insulin pumps into the Heartbeat app.

"Tania." Nina held out a hand. "How have you been?"

"Oh, not so bad." Tania turned from the table where she'd been picking out a crab puff to Nina and took her hand. "Business is good now — we're rating ahead of the next leading pump producer, as you might have heard."

"Congratulations." Nina shook her hand, though her gaze was drawn to the stack of crab puffs behind the woman. "I was wondering if you'd like to collaborate on?—"

"Nina Kendrick," Tania cut her off, her voice awed. Nina saw that her associate's gaze had dropped to her stomach. "Are you pregnant?"

Nina winced internally. She'd hoped to make it through the evening without any comments about her pregnancy — even if people noticed, which was likely given the gentle yet visible curve of her baby bump, she'd hoped they'd be polite enough not to say anything. Apparently, that wasn't the case.

"Yes, I am. As I was saying, would you be interested in working on a new feature for Heartbeat? We could update the data-gathering from your pumps to be a little quicker

— some customers have complained about the slow refresh time.”

“Let’s talk after the baby comes,” Tania said. “It was great talking to you, Nina.” With that, she turned, took another crab puff, and wandered off towards another group. Nina was tempted to stuff her purse full of hors d’oeuvres and make a run for the car. Clearly, it was going to be harder for her to be taken seriously while she was pregnant, as outdated as that felt. Nina needed to convince these people that she was the same dedicated businesswoman she’d always been, pregnancy or no pregnancy — she just wasn’t sure how.

It would be the icing on the cake if Rashad was able to knock her out of the competition more easily because she was pregnant with his child.

Internally cursing Rashad’s name, Nina selected a crab puff from the plate and surveyed the room. Perhaps one of her longer-standing acquaintances would be more willing to work with her. Yet Nina was so caught up in memories of Rashad that she was half convinced she saw him crossing the room towards the bar.

Nina blinked. That actually was Rashad, dressed in a fitted tux and looking as handsome and refreshed as ever. He leaned over the bar to flash a smile at the bartender and, presumably, order a drink.

Nina felt anger sweep through her. The nerve of this man, to show up in her city, on her turf, after refusing to call her back for two months — it was incredible. And there was only one reason Rashad would be here tonight: he’d come to stake Health Trackr’s claim in the sector. He certainly wasn’t here to talk to her.

Rooted to the spot, Nina dithered about what to do. It would feel good to confront Rashad about his betrayals in front of all these people, but that would be a mistake. She couldn’t very well make polite small talk with him though, either.

The best option would be for her to work the room, building support among the med-tech sector as she went, but Nina wasn't sure she was up for that. Worse, she wasn't sure anyone would take her seriously now that she was visibly pregnant.

Nina bit her lip. Slipping out now would feel like she was letting Rashad win, but perhaps it was best that she cut her losses and just left. She could be home in half an hour, where she could make a plan for how to combat Rashad's latest move. Yes, that was the best thing. Nina would leave before Rashad saw her, head home, and reevaluate.

Popping the crab puff into her mouth, Nina sidled towards the door, ready to be out of this room and away from Rashad.

CHAPTER 19

RASHAD

Rashad had been working hard over the last few months.

After returning to Al Soub, he'd thrown himself into meetings with his business partners and strategic sessions. After a lot of consideration, the best way forward had become clear: he would expand into the US market, as planned, but he would emphasize the parts of Health Trackr that made the app unique from Heartbeat. He would likely steal some of Nina's business, but she was resilient, and she'd bounce back. Hopefully, with a little work from both sides, they'd be able to coexist in the US market, with Health Trackr bringing in enough profits to keep Rashad's investors and partners happy, and Heartbeat staying strong enough to provide a steady income for Nina and her twins.

It was a delicate tightrope to walk, but Rashad was doing his best. Just because he couldn't partner with Nina or allow himself to develop a relationship with her didn't mean that he wanted to throw her under the bus, either. Amira and Abdul were a little upset that Rashad wasn't pursuing a more aggressive strategy, but he'd talked them around by pointing out that it wouldn't be possible for Health Trackr to be the only healthcare app in the world and that eventually they'd need to coexist with others.

For now, it was enough.

After months of strategizing, Rashad was ready to return to the United States to lay the groundwork for Health Trackr's rollout. San Diego was the place to be, of course,

so after stops in New York, Chicago, and LA, Rashad intended to spend the majority of his time in the city.

Being in the United States brought back many memories of Nina. They'd only spent a few days together, but the conversations they'd had and the night they'd shared would stay with Rashad forever. So would the hurt on Nina's face when he'd broken things off with her.

The more time went by, the more Rashad wondered if he'd done the right thing. Health Trackr wasn't as all-consuming as it used to be — his achievements felt hollow without someone to share them. Without Nina to share them. He missed her smile and the twins' laughter and the quiet evenings they'd shared over wine and games. Rashad's spacious rooms felt cavernous and too silent, his work was often tedious, and his future had never seemed more opaque.

It was too late to change anything, though. Rashad had destroyed any chance of a future for the two of them — and neither had reached out in the months that followed. Perhaps he should have been the one to reach out, but he was certain that Nina wouldn't want to hear from him. A part of him still hoped she might call, but she hadn't.

Still, as he strode through Times Square for a meeting, ate an American breakfast in a Chicago diner, or stopped by his old college campus in LA to give a talk, he kept imagining that he saw Nina. Every woman with curly blond hair and blue eyes looked like her. Every young child running through Central Park looked like Miles or Kate. Once, in LA, a waitress made a joke about the chef's special not following a recipe, and Rashad looked up, heart pounding, half certain that Nina was standing just behind her.

Perhaps Rashad would always see Nina now, wherever he went and whatever he did.

In San Diego, he was reminded of their time together more than ever. He arrived from LA in the early afternoon and was tempted to return to the yacht to reminisce about Nina. Instead, he sequestered himself in his hotel room and worked until it was time to attend the event he'd come to San Diego for — a networking event for leaders in the med-tech sector. As evening approached, he dressed in his best tux and headed over, ready to rub shoulders with his contemporaries. If part of him hoped he might spot Nina there, he kept that part quiet.

Now, Rashad walked through the doors of the hotel ballroom where the event was held and looked around. The room was already filled with people, some of whom he recognized from his last trip to San Diego. There was no sign of Nina, though.

With about half an hour before a speech by an industry leader, Rashad knew he had lots of networking to do. He needed a drink first, though. He strode across the room to the bar, where he ordered a whiskey, then leaned against the bar to scan the room again. His eyes widened as he caught sight of a familiar figure — could that be Nina? Her blond curls were burned into his memory, but he'd imagined seeing her so many times that he couldn't be sure. This woman was edging towards the doorway, her back to Rashad, but as she neared the door, she turned, and Rashad saw those familiar blue eyes and freckles.

His first thought on seeing her was happiness. She looked well, and he was glad to be in the same room as her again, even if she hated him now. Then the crowd parted slightly, and Rashad saw that her dress was hugging a small but noticeable baby bump. His mouth fell slightly open as his gaze returned to Nina's face — and he saw that she was looking at him, too, her eyes wide.

Whiskey forgotten, Rashad threaded his way towards Nina through the crowd. His heart was racing. Nina was here — and she was pregnant. Rashad was no better at guessing how far along pregnant women were than he was at guessing the age of children, but she seemed to be a few months in, which could mean... Was he the

father? But if he was, why hadn't Nina told him?

"Nina." They met in the middle. Automatically, his hands lifted to take hers, but he cut the movement off.

"You can't be surprised to see me." Nina's voice was harsh, and her blue eyes were averted from Rashad's. "I live here."

"Nina, you're pregnant." Rashad's tone was half shock, half wonder.

She lifted her eyes to his, defiant. "Yes. I am."

"What does this mean? Am I the father?" His tone was low, but he saw that they were attracting a few curious glances from other attendees. It didn't matter — only Nina and the baby mattered right now. "Can we go somewhere and talk?"

"It doesn't mean anything for you." Nina crossed her arms across her stomach. "I tried to contact you, to tell you, but you never called me back."

"That's my fault." Rashad's heart sank. "I told my assistant to be sure that only work-related calls made it through to me. I should have made an exception for you." His mouth felt suddenly dry. "But... does this mean that the baby is mine?"

"You're the father," Nina said, her blue eyes still gleaming defiance. "But the baby is mine. Look, Rashad, maybe there was a chance for things to be different, but that isn't the case now."

Rashad reeled at Nina's words. He was going to be a father. He and Nina were going to have a baby together. As surprised as he was, as much as this wasn't part of the plan, Rashad was overjoyed — yet Nina was staring daggers at him. Even if seeing her again, pregnant, had changed everything for him, it was clear she didn't feel the

same way.

“Please, give me a chance to explain. If I’d known?—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Nina took a step back. “I can’t talk to you. Not now. I have to go.”

“Are you leaving?” Rashad asked, panic spreading. He didn’t know what he would do if Nina walked out now without him being able to explain himself.

“No.” Nina lifted her gaze to Rashad’s again, and he saw hurt there now. Anger. “I have to network, to try to protect my company. From you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Nina, let’s talk about this.” Desperation was creeping into Rashad’s voice.

“I’m sorry.” Nina turned and disappeared into the crowd. Rashad watched her go, still reeling. He couldn’t believe that he was going to be a father. He wanted, desperately, for this baby to be a second chance with Nina, but from the way she had walked away, it was clear that she wasn’t interested in second chances. Rashad had no right to ask for or expect one, not after what he’d done.

Rashad knew he’d made mistakes with her — more than one. He’d known that ever since Nina had walked away from him at sunrise on the yacht. Yet in that moment, as she threaded her way through the crowd towards the far side of the room, the enormity of his mistakes struck him like a splash of icy water early in the morning.

When Rashad had told Nina he wouldn’t work with her or date her, he’d not only closed the door on a relationship between the two of them, but on a future with their child. He hadn’t been selfless or driven when he’d ended things with Nina — he’d been a coward. He had been more concerned about his work, and his past hurts, than about the wonderful woman who’d been standing before him in the present.

Just because Rashad had never felt comfortable with his parents didn’t mean that he couldn’t have been comfortable with Nina. If he’d managed to overcome his insecurities and bet on love instead of fear, he could have been at Nina’s side at this event, escorting her to the refreshments table and offering her a glass of soda or a miniature cake. He could have driven home with her at the end of the night, kissed the sleeping twins on their foreheads, and climbed into bed with Nina. He could have woken the next morning with her head on his shoulder, her hand unfurled on his chest, and her golden curls splayed across the pillow.

The ghost of what could have been lit so briefly in Rashad's mind for a fraction of a second that he felt he could almost reach out and step into that alternate world. But he couldn't.

For the rest of the evening, Rashad considered trying to talk to Nina again, but she was busily networking and clearly avoiding him. From across the room, Rashad noticed that most of her conversations were short, and that many of the people she was talking with gestured to her stomach at one point or another. It must be common knowledge now that she was expecting, and Rashad wondered what she'd told people about the father of her baby.

Nina left before the event had finished, her eyes skating away from Rashad's as she said a few goodbyes before leaving. Once more, Rashad fought the urge to run after her, catch her hand, and beg for another chance, but his words would have sounded hollow after what he'd done.

Yet he couldn't just let her go, either. As he rode back to his hotel that evening in a taxi, watching the sleeping city of San Diego roll by outside, all palm trees and bright windows and wide boulevards, another realization crashed into him.

Nina wasn't just his rival in business, a woman he'd enjoyed a wonderful weekend with, or even the mother of his child. She was the woman he loved. It was as though he'd always known that, but the part of him that had been hurt and scared before had shut down any trace of love. Rashad could admit it now, though. He loved Nina. That was the reason he'd thought of her each day during the months of their separation, the reason his heart had lifted when he'd seen her in the ballroom, and the reason he'd been so quick to push her away back on the yacht — if he loved her, she could hurt him, and he'd wanted to avoid that. Instead, though, he'd hurt them both.

Rashad paid the cab driver and rode the elevator up to his silent, empty hotel room. He sat on the edge of the bed, fully clothed, and felt regret fill him. He'd lost the

woman he loved because he'd been too scared to fight for her. Well, he wasn't scared now, and if there was still even the slimmest chance to play some part in Nina's future, he had to try.

He could only hope it wasn't too late.

CHAPTER 20

NINA

Nina made it all the way to her car before bursting into tears. Seeing Rashad again had hurt more than she'd expected. Beneath her anger and hurt, she still cared about him, which made everything so much worse. Seeing the curve of his lips and the hard lines of his shoulders and jaw had brought the night they'd spent together rushing back — the way he'd run his thumb across her cheekbone, the way he'd breathed her name as though it was a magic spell, the way his dark eyes had watched her as though she was the only person in the world who mattered. His honeyed voice had brought back memories, too, of the way he'd played and swum and cooked with her and the twins. Worst of all was the look of shock and hurt in his eyes when he'd first seen her baby bump, as though she was the one who'd betrayed him.

Nina wiped her tears away with a napkin she found in the glove compartment, feeling overwrought and more tired than ever. Some of her sadness might be attributable to pregnancy hormones, but most of it was because a traitorous part of her still wanted to be with Rashad. That part had hoped that he might take her hands at the event and beg forgiveness — but even if he did, it wouldn't be enough. Nina couldn't trust him again.

Taking a deep breath, Nina crumpled the tearstained napkin in her hands, tossed it into the garbage bag she kept in the car for her preschoolers' snack wrappers and broken toys, and turned the key in the ignition. As she drove home along her familiar

route, thoughts of Rashad refused to leave her. He had looked sorry when he'd realized that his assistant hadn't passed on Nina's message. Sorry wasn't enough, but it was something.

When Nina got home, she took a quick shower and climbed into bed. Before falling asleep, she turned the ring mode on her phone back on. Surely, Rashad would call in the morning to talk about the baby and his role, if nothing else.

Yet Nina woke the next day to no call from Rashad. She kept her phone with her all day as she made pancakes with chocolate chips and whipped-cream smiles for the twins and played a memory game with them, but it still didn't ring. By the time evening came, Nina was increasingly certain that she wasn't going to hear from Rashad at all. Clearly, any sorrow he'd felt when he'd seen Nina pregnant and realized his mistake was fleeting.

Sunday passed without any word from Rashad, then Monday. After putting the kids to bed on Monday evening, Nina found herself sitting on her couch with a mug of chamomile tea, staring at the phone as though she could force him to call by sheer willpower. It was hard to understand how he could see her pregnancy and still have no interest in contacting her, but the answer was clear: Rashad was done with Nina.

It felt like Nina's heart was breaking all over again. She'd harbored a secret hope that if Rashad ever found out about the baby, he'd regret his actions and try to make things right. She'd been wrong. It was obvious now that whatever goodness she'd seen in Rashad was overshadowed by his ruthlessness and indifference. The harm his parents had caused by treating him as lesser than his brother was impossible to undo.

On Tuesday morning, Nina was just leaving a meeting with a few of her investors when her phone rang. She said her goodbyes, then swiped to answer and lifted the phone to her ear.

“Nina Kendrick speaking.”

“Nina.” Rashad’s warm, deep voice came over the phone’s small speaker as clearly as if he were standing beside her, and Nina had to steady herself against the wall. He’d actually called. Nina wasn’t sure if she was angry, relieved, or just tired.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you,” she said, her tone as neutral as she could make it. It felt important that Rashad didn’t know how hurt she was.

“I apologize for that.” There was a short pause. “Nina, I’d like to talk to you.”

“I’m sorry, Rashad.” Nina rubbed her eyes with the flat of her hand. “But I don’t really want to talk to you.”

“I assure you, I’m reaching out because we need to discuss matters of business.” Rashad’s tone was more formal than usual. “Even with everything that’s happened between us, we’re still in the same field, and we would both benefit from setting out some ground rules for our future communication.”

Nina sighed. Talking about business with Rashad was no more appealing than talking about personal matters, but he had a point. If she understood what he was planning, she’d be better prepared to counter him.

“All right. When and where?”

“The yacht. Ten o’clock tomorrow.”

Nina almost laughed. “I’m not agreeing to another yacht trip with you.”

“We won’t even leave the harbor.” There was a hint of something in Rashad’s voice, something that sounded a great deal like a plea. “It’s just a private place where we can meet and talk.”

“Fine. I’ll see you then.” Nina hung up. Tapping her phone against her palm, she sighed. A meeting with Rashad, even if it was truly just a business meeting, wasn’t going to be easy — especially when the meeting was taking place on his yacht, where everything had happened between them. Nina would have to do all she could to show Rashad that she was in control of her company and that she was unfazed by what had passed between them. It would be difficult, but she had to do it.

The next day at ten, Nina clicked her way down the pier in a pair of chunky heels. She’d dressed in a suit, complete with slacks, a white blouse, and a jacket, and pulled her hair back into a neat bun. Her professional outfit was her armor against what was to come — and a reminder to keep things professional, no matter what happened.

Rashad was waiting on the balcony, just as he had been when she’d first boarded the yacht with her enthusiastic kids in tow. He waved to her, then disappeared. Nina boarded, more memories flooding back as she climbed the stairs to the meeting room where they’d sat a few times. Rashad met her on the way up and they walked together, in silence, into the meeting room. Rashad pulled out a chair for Nina, which she was tempted to reject entirely, but she sat.

“All right.” She folded her hands and placed them on the table. “What did you want to discuss?”

“First, thank you for coming.” Rashad met her eyes, his own deep brown ones serious. “I want to present a business proposal.”

“All right.” So, it was coming: the offer to buy her company at an undercutting price. Nina schooled her features. She wasn’t going to sell, even if it was the right move, even though being in Rashad’s presence again was overwhelming. He smelled faintly of aftershave, just as she’d remembered, and her gaze was drawn again and again to his hands as he opened a folder and slid a stack of papers across the table to her. She remembered those hands enveloping hers, resting on her waist, sliding into her hair.

“I’ve spent the last few days working nonstop on a deal that I think could help both of us.” Rashad indicated the papers. “My business partners were skeptical, but it doesn’t matter. I was able to pull together a merger — we can work together, as equals. It’s a step beyond what we discussed on the yacht, but I think you’ll see that this will be even more beneficial.”

Nina didn’t even look at the proposal. “There’s no way I’m going to work with you. The last time we discussed a deal like this, you pulled the rug out from under me.” Beyond that, it stung that Rashad was truly only interested in business when she was sitting across the table from him, pregnant with his child.

“I know.” Rashad flipped a few pages. “That’s why this agreement has a guarantee in it — if I ever try to screw you over again, you can activate the guarantee, and the company will pass, in trust, to the twins and our child. You would still be able to earn income from it, but I wouldn’t. I’ve already signed.”

Slowly, Nina raised her eyes to Rashad’s. “I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?” Rashad’s voice had lost the businesslike tone. He now sounded like the man who’d shared heartfelt conversations with her under the starlight — open and a little nervous.

“Why would you do this?” Nina gestured to the agreement. “This helps me, but you’d be worse off than you were before. If you’re offering this merger out of guilt over the baby, I think it’s a mistake. Guilt isn’t enough for us to be able to work together.”

“I do feel guilty,” Rashad said. “I should never have pushed you away after our weekend together, and I should have made sure my assistant knew to put calls from you straight through. But I’m not offering this merger out of guilt.” He hesitated. “I’m offering it out of love.”

Nina could hardly believe what she was hearing. “Love?” She meant to sound scathing, but her voice shook a little.

“Yes. All my life, I’ve been scared to get too close to anyone, because it meant I could be hurt. The world of business was safer, because nothing was ever personal, and everyone was working towards the bottom line — nothing more. Then I met you, and Miles, and Kate. I know it only lasted a few days, but the weekend we spent together changed me, Nina. You changed me. I saw what life could be like if I allowed myself to open my heart, but I was still too much of a coward to take that risk. I’m not now.”

Nina was speechless. After two months of silence, Rashad was saying exactly what she’d never let herself dream of hearing — and she didn’t know what to do.

“What are you saying?” she asked, her voice hushed.

“I want another chance with you.” Rashad reached for Nina’s hands across the table,

and she let him take them, still half in a daze. His thumb skated across the back of her hand, sending pleasant shivers down her arm. “I made a terrible mistake when I walked away from you. I never should have done that, and I can only hope that it isn’t too late to make things right. Because I love you, Nina. I love you. I love the twins, too, and I know I’ll love this baby just as much. I can’t imagine my life without you. And the only way I can ask you to trust me again is by sharing everything with you — including our companies.”

“You love me?”

“Of course I do.” Rashad’s mouth quirked into a smile. “I’ve loved you for a long time, Nina. You’re amazing. I don’t know many people who could do what you do — raising kids on your own and running a business can’t be easy, but you handle everything in your stride. You’re smart, resourceful, funny, selfless, playful, gorgeous, and so much more. When I’m with you, I feel like a better man. What’s not to love?”

Nina’s heart was pounding in her chest. Part of her wanted to throw her arms around Rashad and let herself melt into him, but she held back. Her hand in his was more than enough right now, and she still had questions.

“What about the baby? And Kate and Miles? If you’re going to be in a relationship with me, if you’re going to say you love me, you have to be ready to accept them, too. You have to be ready to be a father to our baby.”

“I’m ready.” Rashad squeezed her hand. “I never thought I would be, but I understand now that no one really feels ready to be a parent — especially people like me, who didn’t have good role models. But if I walk away from you and the twins and our baby now, that would make me just as bad as my parents. Worse, probably. Showing up for you and for them is the only way for me to be the kind of man, partner, and father I want to be.”

Nina nodded and drew her lip between her teeth. Worry flickered across Rashad's handsome features.

"That is, I want to show up for you and the kids — if there's a place for me. I understand that I've made mistakes, and that my business proposal doesn't erase those mistakes. Despite that, do you think, perhaps, you'd be willing to give me another chance?"

A tear rolled from Nina's eye, though she was barely aware of it. She nodded again and finally trusted herself to speak.

"Rashad." His name felt as sweet and rich as creamy coffee on her tongue. "I'm ready to give you another chance. I... I love you, too. I wanted to deny that, especially given what happened the last day on the yacht, but I do. I love you."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:07 am

“Nina.” Her name was an incantation on his lips, drawing her towards him. “Oh, Nina. I love you. And I’m so, so sorry.”

Nina wasn’t sure who moved first, but then they were on their feet, the chairs scraping back as they hurried around the table. Rashad caught Nina in his arms, and she pressed her face against his firm chest, overcome by everything that had passed between them in the last few moments. She could hear his heartbeat against hers and feel the warmth emanating from him.

“Am I so ugly that you can’t even look at me?” There was a teasing undertone in Rashad’s voice now, and Nina laughed despite herself — and despite the tears still glistening in her eyes.

“No, of course not.” She lifted her head and tilted her chin back so that she could meet his intense gaze. “I just... I can hardly believe that this is real. I thought I’d never see you again — or that I’d only see you as a rival.”

“I thought the same.” Rashad’s lips crooked into a smile. “I’m glad we were wrong.”

“Me too.” Nina paused. “You’ll have to apologize to the twins, too. I made plenty of excuses, but they were sad not to see you again after the weekend together.”

Rashad winced. “I’m ready to apologize. The twins deserve better. So do you.”

“No.” Nina lifted onto her tiptoes until her lips were only inches from Rashad’s. She could smell that aftershave scent and see the five o’clock shadow across his chin, though it was barely afternoon. She could see the way his pupils dilated when she

was near and the look in his eyes, as though he wanted nothing more than her. “I think you’ll do just fine the second time around.”

“I’ll do my best,” Rashad said, his eyes never leaving Nina’s. “I don’t suppose I could steal a kiss?”

“Hmm.” Nina pretended to consider. “I suppose that could be arranged.”

As if he’d been waiting to hear those words for years and couldn’t wait a second longer, Rashad pulled Nina into a kiss. Their lips met with all the passion they’d had during their first kiss all those months ago, but there was something more now, too. This time, Rashad kissed Nina with the promise of a future and the surety of a love that wouldn’t waver, no matter what happened. He tasted like sweet coffee and hope.

They kissed for a long time, as though they were the only two people in the world. When Rashad finally pulled away, he kept his arms around her.

“So, tell me, what shall we do now?” he asked, his voice low.

“First, we’ll sign our agreement.” Nina nodded to the papers on the table. “Then, I think we should take the day off, don’t you?”

“We can go for a sail,” Rashad suggested. “You can bring Miles and Kate.”

“You can tell me more about how amazing I am.”

“You can tell me all about our baby.”

They smiled at each other, then Nina extricated herself from Rashad’s embrace and picked up the pen. It scratched against the paper as she signed, the smell of ink wafting into the air. With a smile, she turned back to Rashad.

“I need one more thing to seal our agreement.”

“Anything.”

“One more kiss — then we’ll officially be in business.”

“You don’t even have to ask.” Rashad swept her into a dipped kiss.

Later, they would go for a sail, the twins in tow. They’d swim and cook together and play board games and hide-and-seek. But for now, on this warm March day with the future bright and wide ahead of them, they led each other to Rashad’s bedroom, their laughter and teasing turning into something sweeter and more intimate.

Finally, there were no more secrets and no more fears between them.

EPILOGUE

NINA

It was hard to believe that one whole year had passed.

Nina looked down at the sleeping face of her younger son in her arms. His eyes were closed, and his long lashes, so reminiscent of his father’s, were splayed across his chubby cheeks. His rosebud mouth was curved in what Nina could only describe as a smile, though her baby books had warned her that at only four months old, Rafi was probably too young to be smiling.

“How are you, my love?” An arm slid around Nina’s waist and she sensed as much as felt Rashad’s presence beside her. She leaned back against his muscular chest, enveloped in his masculine scent and his warmth.

“He just finished feeding and he’s asleep now.” Nina turned her head to give Rashad a quick kiss. “How was the meeting?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:08 am

Rashad had just had a virtual sit-down with his two business partners, Amira and Abdul. Since they'd become parents, Nina and Rashad had delegated a significant portion of their work to Rashad's staff. Now, most of their days were filled with sticky preschooler hands and toothless baby smiles. Occasionally, one of them ducked out for an important meeting or a few hours of essential work, but for the most part, the little family was able to just enjoy each other.

"It went well. They agreed with our plan to partner with hospitals to offer affordable healthcare-monitoring options for newly diagnosed patients." Rashad kissed Nina's cheek, the press of his lips sending pleasant shivers down her spine, then kissed Rafi's forehead. "Let's put all thoughts of business out of our minds, though. Today is all about family."

"The twins are excited." Nina shifted Rafi in her arms and leaned back against Rashad. "I think they know something's happening, even though we haven't told them what."

"Do you think they'll be happy about me adopting them?" Rashad asked. There was a hesitation in his voice, which Nina knew was because he still worried he wasn't a good enough dad, even though he did an excellent job with all three children.

"Of course. You've been a father to Miles and Kate this last year, and they'll be thrilled to make things official."

"I already love them like my kids, so it doesn't feel like much will change. I am looking forward to having things official, though."

For the last few months, Rashad and Nina had been discussing Rashad's planned adoption of the twins. They'd agreed to take the kids out on a weekend yachting trip, just as they'd done more than a year ago, and announce the news then. Nina had cried tears of joy when Rashad had first said he wanted to adopt the twins, although whether that was really from the news or from postpartum hormones, she wasn't sure. Either way, she was overjoyed that Rashad wanted to become the twins' official dad.

"Speaking of which, we should go and wake the little rascals," Nina said. "I've already packed their bags, so all we have left to do is give them breakfast and get them out the door." She carefully laid Rafi into his crib, set up his baby monitor, then slipped out of the nursery with Rashad by her side. Rafi had been up early that morning, wanting to be rocked, so Nina didn't mind letting him sleep while they got the twins ready.

There was no need to wake Kate and Miles, though, because they were already up when Rashad and Nina came into their room. They were both in Miles's bed, whispering to each other and giggling.

When Rashad and Nina had purchased their family home in a leafy San Diego suburb six months ago, they'd considered giving each twin their own room. They'd quickly realized, though, that at four years old, both the twins were still happier together than apart. The house was big enough that in a year or two, they could move Kate down the hall to her own bedroom and give both twins some privacy.

Nina loved their house. It was decorated with pictures of the five of them at the park, playing minigolf, and posing with Santa last Christmas. There were also pictures of the twins growing up and a few snapshots of Rashad and Nina posing together. More than anywhere Nina had ever lived, this house felt like a perfect home.

"Are you guys ready to go?" Rashad asked.

“Yeah!” The twins bounced, sharing matching grins that took up most of their little faces. “Let’s go!”

As had become their morning routine, Nina and Rashad each scooped up a twin to help with toothbrushing and dressing. Theyall reconvened in the kitchen for a breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, and fresh fruit expertly prepared by Nina and Rashad earlier that morning, Rafi now awake from his nap and babbling in a carrier on Rashad’s chest.

Nina couldn’t help smiling as she listened to the twins’ excited chatter and caught Rashad’s grin. Everything in her life felt absolutely perfect. The road hadn’t always been easy; it had been an adjustment workingwithRashad instead of against him. Learning to parent a newborn all over again had been a learning curve, too. Even being in a relationship after many years alone had meant a lot of adjustments for them both.

Yet every second had been worth it. Nina remembered Rashad scooping the twins into his arms when they’d reunited after three months apart. She remembered him holding her hand during every prenatal appointment and during labor, never wavering. She remembered the first night they’d spent together as a family, all snuggled on the couch under warm blankets, wrinkled newborn Rafi in Nina’s lap, Rashad by her side, and the twins flopped over their legs.

While Nina and Rashad had enjoyed their family, business had been thriving, too. It turned out that they were both able to hand over a lot of their responsibilities without any dire consequences, and business was better than ever. Nina liked to think that, in a few months, she and Rashad might work a little more, together, but for now she loved having everyone at home.

After breakfast, they packed the children into the car. Rafi was sleeping again, even as Nina eased him into the car seat, but he woke once they set off and the twins began

to sing along with the oldies station Rashad put on the radio. He smiled gummy smiles at everyone as they drove.

Rashad reached over and gave Nina's hand a quick squeeze as she drove. She looked up to see that he was smiling at her, a private look of genuine affection that warmed her heart. Even though they were often with the kids, a single look from Rashad always made Nina feel like they were alone together.

On the yacht, Miles "helped" Rashad drive the boat out of the harbor, while Kate "helped" Nina change Rafi's diaper and get him settled. Once they were out on open water, everyone reconvened for board games and snacks on deck. The afternoon was spent swimming and playing, though Rafi sat out the water portion of events with one parent or the other. As evening drew in, Nina and Rashad exchanged a glance and a nod. With the twins curled up on a bench seat on the top deck and Rafi playing in his portable baby gym, Rashad took Nina's hand.

"Kate, Miles," he began, "I have a present for each of you."

The twins, intrigued, sat up a little straighter as Rashad handed over two gift bags. The twins tore into them and pulled out a T-shirt each. On the T-shirts were five figures: Nina, Rashad, Kate, Miles, and baby Rafi, all enclosed in a heart.

Patiently, Rashad explained. "I've loved you like I was your dad for a long time now, but I want to make sure everyone knows we're a family. I'd like to adopt you both, so that I can be your dad forever and ever."

The twins had a few questions, but mostly they were excited. They both climbed onto the couch to hug Rashad, and he kissed their heads. When they climbed off, he took their hands.

"I think now it's time, right?"

The twins nodded, identical blond heads bobbing. “Yeah!”

“Remember what we talked about?”

“Yeah!”

Kate and Miles took each other’s hands and ran into the interior of the yacht. Nina gave Rashad an inquisitive look.

“What was that about?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 5:08 am

“You’ll see.” Rashad took her hand again. A moment later, the twins reemerged, carrying large posterboard signs. They held them up over their heads.

“Marry our dad,” Nina read from Kate’s sign, suddenly breathless. “Please will you,” she read from Miles’s.

“Oops, those might be backwards,” Rashad said. Nina turned to him and saw that he was on the floor on one knee, a ring box open in his hand. A bright diamond glittered up at Nina. “The very first day I met you, you began changing my life for the better. You helped me understand that there’s more to life than work. You taught me how to love, even when it’s frightening. You made me a father. I can never repay you for all you’ve done, but I’d like to spend every day trying, for the rest of our lives, if you’d like that.”

Nina felt teary. “There’s nothing to repay.”

“Even so.” Rashad smiled at her. “I love you, Nina. I want to show you that every day. Please, will you marry me?”

Nina’s heart overflowed with warmth as she held out her hand. “Of course I will.”

In a heartbeat, Rashad slid the ring onto Nina’s finger, before standing and sweeping her into his arms for a kiss. A moment later, the twins were there, hugging their legs, and, smiling at each other, Nina and Rashad bent down for a group hug.

“There’s a celebratory cake in the kitchen,” Rashad told the twins. Squealing with joy, Miles and Kate ran towards the kitchen, and Rashad wrapped his arms around

Nina once again. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Just like I’ve felt like a dad to the twins for a long time, I’ve felt like a husband to you for a long time, but I’m ready to make things official.”

“So am I.” Nina smiled. “I don’t think I could be happier right now.”

“Just wait until you see the cake.” Rashad winked.

At that moment, little Rafi began to murmur happily. Rashad picked him up, then took Nina’s hand again. Together, they walked towards the kitchen where the twins waited. With her fiancé, soon-to-be husband, by her side, and their three kids around her, everything was perfect.

The End