

“For Better or Worse...”

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A Literary Road Press Publication

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-934037-53-9

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[ONE]

"Bo, the bus will be here in less than ten minutes!" Sandra shouted at the ceiling. She leaned against the counter, sipping coffee as she looked through the window. A pair of teens strolled past her house dressed like something straight out of a music video. Her gaze shifted, focusing just beyond to the neat cookie-cutter houses on the opposite side of the street—all similar to her own comfortable abode with wide swaths of bright green grass lining the perfect concrete walkways and drives, giving the illusion of interwoven harmony.

"Hey, Sandra," Bo said, entering the kitchen and dropping his backpack on the counter with a resounding thud. He slid a paper across the counter. "I need you to sign this permission slip before I go."

"For what? Another field trip?" Smiling as she faced him, she ignored the way he still used her name instead of calling her "Mom." She knew it'd take longer to gain the title from her preteen stepson considering his father and her had married less than a year ago.

"Yeah." Bo shoved half of a bagel in his mouth and continued explaining, although somewhat muffled. "To the Museum downtown."

"Sounds interesting." She picked up the paper, read it a moment, then grabbed a pen and scribbled her name. "Well, you're more than welcome to go as long as there are no more *events* like last time."

He rolled his eyes before downing a small glass of juice.

"It was just a prank," he said.

"I understand but as your father has stated, regardless of the motivation, causing the toilets to overflow is not what either of us would consider appropriate field trip behavior." She handed him the form.

"Okay. I get it." He took the paper, grabbed the other half of the bagel and tossed them both into his bag. Turning towards the door, he called back over his shoulder. "Don't forget, I'm going to Matt's after school."

The door shut with a slam. She watched him trot across the yard towards a group of boys. Once they moved out of sight, she picked the coffee back up and headed towards the refrigerator where the color-coded squares of her calendar greeted her.

"Hmm," she hummed as she reviewed the next few weeks of activities; her gaze paused on the brightly outlined red panels. "Only a week and a half to convention."

A high-pitched chime sounded from the other room. "Time for work."

* * *

"Bane Consulting," Sandra queried, answering the phone upon entering her office while carefully balancing a stack of folders along with her purse. "Yes. Yes, this is the right place. No," she set the pile down on her desk, "I don't think that would be a problem. You have a nice day, too." She hung up the phone. Being the one of only three associates in the area for Bane, the job often kept her busy from the moment she walked in the door.

Glancing at the large white message board, she deciphered the comments left by the other two associates then paused as the last note from the third shift man caught her eye, *New recruit...meeting this a.m.* She smiled wryly. It'd been quite some time since another potential client had come through her department.

"Wonder if they were born for the job or just modified," she mused, turning back to her desk.

The phone rang again.

"Bane Consulting," Sandra answered. It was one of her associates. "Good morning, Bruce. No, I haven't seen them yet. Just got in. Sure thing, I'll get right on them. The new guy? Yes, I saw the note. No. Haven't met him. Yes. I'll do that. As soon as I know something. Sure. Thanks again." She settled the receiver a little harder this time. "When will he realize I do actually know what I'm doing?"

Returning to the message board, she began erasing the remarks she'd left the day before. Once finished, she went back to her desk, booted up her computer, then flipped on the monitor. A neat row of daily reminders flashed on the screen. After sitting, she clicked them off until only three were left.

"Looks like a pretty easy day."

The phone rang.

"Oh, geez." She grabbed the receiver. "Bane Consulting."

"Sandra?"

"Speaking. How can I help you?"

"It's Kahne."

She froze a moment before a slow smile crossed her features. The solid image of her old flame formed in her mind. "Really?"

"Yes." He chuckled. "I'm back in the states. Thought I'd give you a call."

"Are you still with Bane?"

“Would I be with anyone else?”

“Sorry.” She laughed at the silliness of her question. “That was stupid of me.”

“It wasn’t. You never know. I might one day get tired of defending the undefendable and go elsewhere.”

“Now, Kahne, we both know people like us are destined to work for Bane. Who else would put up with our somewhat *peculiar* behavior?”

“Well, that and the money’s pretty good, too.”

“I have to agree there.”

An awkward silence fell.

“Anyway, I was just calling to see whether you were coming to convention this month?”

She felt the flush of heat on her cheeks. “Well, I’d planned on it.”

“Good. I was hoping you were.”

Another pause.

“Kahne, you are aware I’m married now.”

No answer.

“Kahne?”

“Yes, I but I don’t believe it changes our relationship. As I see it, we’ll always be friends, right?”

She hesitated slightly on her reply. “Yes, Kahne. We’ll always be friends.”

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