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*Shades of Blue*

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# One

CREATING THE RIGHT SPIN USUALLY CAME easily for Brad Cutler, but this time he was struggling. Kotton Kids Clothing was the account of the moment, a lucrative campaign with a high-end product that should've been easy to work with.

He stared out the window and tried to focus. The stunning view from his downtown New York City office on the twenty-first floor of the Westmont Building was hardly conducive to figuring out family moments as they related to soft cotton clothing. Even so, the chaos of Manhattan wasn't the problem. Brad could work anywhere, and on this day, creating a campaign should've been even easier. His office had been transformed, surrounded by soft pastel fabrics, instrumental lullabies, and poster-size images of children — all intended to take him from the frantic pace of the city into another world.

A world of babies and beginnings.

Brad turned away from the window and braced himself against the solid walnut table that spanned the center of the spacious room. Never mind that he didn't have personal experience with babies. This account shouldn't stump him. He believed in the product — Kotton Kids, a luxury high-end organic cotton clothing and bedding line for pampered babies and toddlers. Brad understood the assignment.

But between his understanding of the task and his ability to create unforgettable ad copy stood a virtual wall of stone. Brad couldn't scale the jagged sides no matter how he tried, and worse, there was no logical reason for the barrier. Except maybe one. A

sick feeling came over him and he closed his eyes. Earlier today he glimpsed the dance of shadows from long-ago days, the whisper of a memory from an old, almost-forgotten place in his soul.

He stared out the window and the feeling came around him again. The faint smell of summer sand on a North Carolina shore, the shades of blue where sky and sea blur, the feel of her beside him. A memory he hadn't dared think about in years.

*You're losing your mind, Cutler*, he told himself. *What could any of that have to do with an ad campaign? Help me focus, God.* He raked his fingers through his blond hair and glanced at the clock on the wall. Almost noon. In a few minutes his boss, Randy James, would stop in to see how he was doing, and Brad had no idea what to tell him. Randy James had trusted him with a project that could take the company to the next level this year ... and for years to come.

Randy James. His boss, and in six weeks, his father-in-law.

He paced to the far end of the room where a display of the cotton product covered two chairs and the end of the table. The colors were soft, muted pinks and blues and tans. He picked up a plush blanket and ran his thumb along the satin edge. He'd come up with only a few slogan lines so far, and nothing he was crazy about. *Babies deserve better ...* The words ran in his mind again and he edited them. *Your baby deserves better.* That was closer, but still not the slam dunk he was looking for. *Because your baby deserves the best ...* He let the words hang in the hallway of his heart for a few seconds.

Whatever he chose, the president of Kotton Kids would be in the office Wednesday for the presentation. If the pitch wasn't strong, Brad could lose the campaign. He lifted the blanket and brushed it against his cheek. Softest stuff ever, like a warm breeze across his skin. The product was brilliant. If he failed this assignment, the blame would be his alone.

But still the wall remained.

His eyes moved along the surface of the table, to the photos of the babies. Eight of them under a year old in various baby positions—crawling, stretched out with feet in the air, cradled in a mother’s arms. Brad imagined his fiancée, Laura, holding a baby in a blanket like the one in his hands. *Because love is soft ... the soft side of love ...* He tried to picture the words sprawled across a magazine ad, but he locked onto the eyes of one of the babies instead. A blonde little girl barely standing, braced against a coffee table. She was looking over her shoulder, and with the music and the blanket and his mind-set over the past few hours, there was almost something familiar about her innocent eyes. He shifted his attention to a little boy crawling across a plush carpet, head tilted up, eyes full of mischief. What would it feel like to have a baby look at him like that?

There was the sound of a sharp knock. Brad looked away from the little boy and dropped the blanket to the table. “Yes?”

Randy James opened the door and stuck his head inside, a grin stretched across his face. “You up for lunch? Two Times Square?”

“Uh ...” Brad wanted to say no. It was Monday and he needed every hour surrounded by the cotton clothes and baby photos and lullabies, every possible opportunity to get a brilliant slogan on paper. But Randy didn’t ask every day, and Two Times Square was one of the nicest restaurants in the Theater District, meaning his boss had a reason for the invitation. There was only one answer. Brad smiled big. “Sure.” He hit a button on a remote control and the music stopped. “Of course.” He walked around the table, grabbed his suit coat, and followed his boss. The two of them could talk about the campaign over fish and salads. The change of scenery would clear his mind so he could think better when he returned.

Or maybe a good conversation would tear down the wall.

Two Times Square was situated above the lobby of the Renaissance Hotel. Quiet and elegant, the restaurant exterior was

made entirely of glass with a view of Times Square that was as stunning as it was surreal. Like the place was hung in a quiet bubble above the craziness below. The maitre d' knew Randy. He sat them without a wait, and Randy ordered his usual—a bottle of Pellegrino and a shrimp cocktail to start. Brad agreed to the water, but not the appetizer.

Randy waited until they both had full goblets before taking a long sip and giving the table a light slap. “Six weeks.” He sat back, his face beaming. “All this planning and you and Laura will be married in six weeks.”

“Six weeks.” Brad’s heart lifted some.

“I can barely think, I’m so excited.” Randy chuckled. “Can you believe it’s already here?”

“Feels like we just announced the engagement.” Brad gazed through the sheet of glass at the traffic below. That could be it, right? The wedding? The planning and excitement, the count-down and communication with his family back in North Carolina. That might be interfering with his creative process. The wedding was on his mind constantly. He was marrying the girl of his dreams in a carefully planned outdoor ceremony. Then there was the elaborate celebration that would take place at the Liberty House Grand Ballroom across the river from lower Manhattan. All that and they were honeymooning on Grand Cayman Island, after which she would move into his New York flat. All his dreams were coming true over the next few months. Life couldn’t be more beautiful.

No, the wedding wasn’t the problem. Loving Laura James had never been a distraction, not even now with their big day drawing near. He lifted his eyes beyond the high-rise buildings, up past the enormous animated billboards with their lights and flashing messages that stood out even in daylight. If he squinted at the space between the concrete and steel, he could make out the New York sky. Never as blue as the one over Holden Beach.

He blinked and a once-familiar laughter flirted with his senses in a distant sort of way. Without warning he missed home. Missed it more than he had in four springs at least.

“Brad?” Randy craned his neck a little closer. Concern flashed in his eyes. “You didn’t answer me.”

“Sorry.” A quick laugh, and Brad straightened himself. He took a long drink of water. “You got me dreaming about the wedding. The end of June.” Another laugh. “It can’t get here fast enough.”

Randy’s smile slowly returned. “Yes.” He relaxed into his seat. “Things are good, right? You and Laura? The wedding plans?”

“They’re great.” This time his answer came easily and honestly. “Laura’s amazing. I’m the luckiest guy ever.”

“You both are.” Randy picked up the menu, stared at it for a minute, and frowned. “Pumpkin soup. Strange choice for the middle of May.”

Randy had his usual—a half order of grilled halibut with sautéed spinach. Brad took the small chicken Caesar. Dinner was at the James’ house tonight, after Laura and her mother returned from making final preparations for the wedding. Brad couldn’t afford to be overly full.

Not until halfway through lunch did Randy set his fork down. “Tell me about Kotton Kids.”

Brad gave a slow nod, his mind racing. “Great product.”

“Definitely. Brilliant. With everyone going green, and the quality of the material. They’ll capture the market if we handle the ad right.”

“I agree.”

“We need to knock this one out of the park.” Randy dabbed the linen napkin at the corners of his mouth. “I was going through the product line earlier today. Makes me anxious to hold that first grandchild. In a Kotton Kids blanket, of course.” He laughed at his wit.

The mention of a grandchild made Brad's stomach drop. He stared at his plate for a few seconds.

"So," Randy tapped his fingertips on the table. He waited until he had Brad's full attention again. "What're you coming up with?"

"A few ideas." Brad's heart rate quickened. He took another drink of water. "I'm building the campaign around the softness of the cloth. Soft justifies the cost, in this case."

"I like it." Randy seemed satisfied with the direction. "Let's meet tomorrow and look over what you have. The meeting Wednesday is only preliminary. Obviously at this point, you don't need more than a basic slogan and a general campaign direction to keep the Kotton Kids brass happy."

"Exactly."

They finished lunch and a Towne Car picked them up outside the Renaissance for the return ride to the Financial District. Back in his office Brad took off his jacket, sorted through his four phone messages, and returned all of them. He saved the call to Laura for last.

"Hey," he heard his tone soften at the sound of her voice on the other end. "How was your morning?"

"Perfect." Her joy filled the space between them. "We confirmed the linens at the Liberty House. It'll be stunning, Brad. Really. Lots of room to dance." She barely paused for a breath. "And this afternoon ... we're taking a final look at my dress. I wish you could go."

"With you?" He grinned, teasing her.

"No, silly. Not really." She laughed. "It's just ... it's so pretty."

"Of course it is." He couldn't wait to see her later. Maybe picturing her in a wedding dress could pull his mind from the far-away place it seemed bent on visiting. He would be with her in just a few hours, but that wasn't soon enough. He ached to hold her in his arms, feel her hand in his. "I can't wait to see you."

“Me too. We talked to the chef at the country club. He gave us a list of food choices. Seafood or a prime rib carving station.”

“Sounds great.” He closed his eyes and willed the hours to pass so they could be together. “I already know what I want.”

“What’s that?”

“You.” The meaning in his tone grew deeper. “You and always you. Only you.”

He could almost hear her smile. “Have I told you how much I love you, Mr. Cutler?”

“Tell me again.” He swiveled his chair and stared down at the busy street below.

“I’ve loved you since the day we met, and I’ve thanked my dad a thousand times for hosting that office barbecue.” A smile sounded in her voice. “You were talking about your faith, and how you wanted to live for God.” She took a quick breath. “I don’t know. We walked up that path and the sun was setting behind the dogwoods at the back of our yard. And somehow I knew I’d love you till the day I died. Because we believe in the same things, you and I.”

The nervous feeling was back. Brad swallowed hard and struggled to keep her from noticing. “I think I knew even before that.”

“Really?”

“Since the beginning of time.” He focused on the picture of her in his head. “Tell me about today.”

They talked another few minutes about the wedding. Laura promised to share more later about the details she and her mom had worked out that day. “Go back to work. By the way, have I told you my dad thinks you’re brilliant?”

“Well,” he chuckled. “Then I guess I *really* better get back to work.”

“And I better go see that dress.”

The call ended and Brad found the remote control. Gentle music filled the room again. He could do this. He could come

up with a Kotton Kids slogan in the next two hours and prove to himself he was back on his game. The music led him out of his chair and over to the pictures, back to the product. He ran his hand over a snugly looking one-piece outfit. Infant pajamas in pale blue. Softer than air.

*Hmmm. Softer than air?* He mulled the words over. *Because love should be softer than air.* No, something shorter. *Love is softer than air.* He focused on the photo of the little girl standing near the coffee table. The one with the familiar eyes. *Because baby love is softer than air.*

Those eyes. He looked away and the words fell apart. What was it about that face? He couldn't possibly know her. He walked a few steps closer, and in a single beat of his heart he knew. He knew with everything inside him. It wasn't wedding plans, or the pressure of a big ad campaign. It was the babies. And he thought of something else. It was the middle of May, so maybe ... maybe there was another reason he was being drawn back to Holden Beach.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the date, and there it was. May 15. He should've thought of this before. He stared at the phone and then leaned back against the wall of his office, his eyes closed. In a rush of emotion and heartache, every image on the table fled from his mind. It was May 15, and suddenly there was no ad campaign, no dinner later that night, nothing except the one, undeniable truth shouting at him from every side. The truth was this:

She would be nine today.