

Simone's Little Project

Chapter Two

June 2021

Okay, sure, that makes sense. But if the log file is outputting there, and this directory is locked while the data export is in progress... Wait, no. Dammit, that won't work after all. But what if-

The cell phone on the darkened desk buzzed to life, emitting a warbling trill uncannily reminiscent of a certain blue-and-white droid. The young man seated beside it reached over absently to silence the thing, his eyes still fixed on the glowing rows of text before him. *Oh, bother.* If it wasn't a telemarketer, it was likely Uber Eats reminding him yet again of how he could save a whopping twenty dollars off his next order. But just as his fingers descended to silence the annoying thing, out of the corner of his eye he caught a now-familiar name on its screen.

Simone Escalier? Wait, from Mandracom?

Yes, it was. "Hi, hope you're doing good." *Um, okay. Nice and polite.* "Back in LA at last." *Oh, yeah – she had that thing somewhere back east, didn't she?* "Thinking about project some more." *You'd better be; we've got this deadline in less than two weeks!* "Want to chat over dinner sometime?"

Oh, dang.

No, wait, it couldn't be that kind of dinner. Not like- like a date. Not a *date* date, right? Nah, couldn't be. Simone probably had some bad news to break – about the project's mushrooming budget, most likely – and she probably figured a dinner would be the best way to soften him up. Yeah, that had to be it.

But then again...

His dark eyes flitted over the screen a few more times, reading and rereading Simone's text. *Is she hitting on me? She does say "hi" and "hope you're doing good" and "want to chat". Surely that's as friendly a sign as any, right?* No, he shouldn't jump to conclusions. Maybe he should be leery of her, tell her no. Oh, but then again, he couldn't afford to piss off such an important supplier...

Whatever. His fingers wandered across the screen, pecking out words, then backspacing, then typing again as he struggled out a reply. "Hi, nice to hear you are back" - *exclamation mark.* "I am" *no, scratch that.* "Happy to discuss any time. Maybe this Thursday?" And then at long last, down

went his finger on "Send."

Well, the ball was in her court now. And whether she really did just want to meet for work, or whether she wanted something more... Vijay would simply have to wait and see.

Though truth be told, it was very difficult for him to focus once more on the confusing database replication project he was toying with. Just when he seemed to start making headway, he'd suddenly realize that his mind was mulling over not directories and lines of code, but images of Simone: reasonably tall, shoulder length brownish hair, clad in her elegant navy pantsuit and flashing a business-like smile. She was attractive, that was for certain. And maybe, just maybe, she wanted to get to know him better over dinner...

The sky was growing dark when the dark green rideshare sedan slid up alongside the busy sidewalk and disgorged its neatly dressed and visibly nervous passenger into the crowd. Vijay – for Vijay it was – looked apprehensively about, scanning through the milling hordes of shoppers and diners and tourists for Simone's familiar face. *She said seven fifteen. It's seven twelve; maybe she's not here yet? Wait, is this even the right place?*

It was barely a minute later, as his head was bent over his phone in search of the appointed restaurant's address, that he heard her warm voice startlingly close. "Vijay? Ah, there you are!" She was smiling as she extended her hand, taking his own sweaty palm in hers in a professional, yet amiable handshake. "The traffic was really quite awful, so I do hope I haven't kept you waiting?"

No, no, he managed. He'd just arrived there himself. No worries, no worries at all. And then, pleasantries exchanged, he found himself following her lead into the cool, elegant interior of the restaurant they'd come to patronize. Clearly she'd been there before, judging by her unhesitating manner and confident smile. And before he quite knew it, he was slipping into a seat across from her, hoping fervently that he didn't look quite as awkward as he felt.

Fortunately, that was perhaps the worst – those first few moments. After that? Well, he wasn't quite sure. Simone had this way of smiling at you, of following up even the most trivial remark you might make with an intelligent and engaged inquiry. And within minutes – indeed, before the appetizers had even arrived – he found himself telling her almost eagerly about the progress they'd made, and about how it was quite similar to another project they'd finished two years before...

"You seem quite experienced in these sorts of projects," she observed, taking a gentle sip of her wine. "I wish all our clients were quite as knowledgeable and understanding as you." And then, before he could quite decide how to respond to the compliment, she was leaning forward. "But enough about our business, no? Tell me, Vijay – what sort of things do you do when you're not slaving away? Better yet – I'm dying to know more about your background! If you don't mind, that is..."

And from there the evening progressed. He found himself telling her about his childhood in Bangladesh, about monsoons and Bangla New Year and his doting parents. And in return, he learned that she had a sister, Corinne; that she 'd grown up in Oregon; that she'd originally dreamed of going into journalism but that she'd found business a bit more... "stable", as she put it.

Yeah, he mused as she flashed him another smile over her truffle risotto. He could see it. With that candor and charming smile, she would have made a hell of an interviewer.

Perhaps it was the dimly lit room, or the seductive murmur of the other diners, or maybe the beautiful scent of her perfume. Maybe all three. But by the time the officious waiter was slipping the gilt-edged dessert menu down before them, Vijay was 98.4% certain: this woman was indeed flirting with him. And somehow, he found he didn't mind one bit.

"Well, this has been a lovely evening," she sighed as they emerged at last into the neon-lit city street. "Thank you *so much* for taking the time to chat tonight. I've enjoyed it immensely, you know..." Vijay flushed and nodded, trying desperately to come up with some socially acceptable response as his mind roiled in indecision. Wait, was this the part where he was supposed to ask her out again? Or ask if she wanted to come to his house for a- what did they call it in the movies? A nightcap? But he didn't drink- And wasn't this more of a mere business dinner-?

"Um, sure, it- it has been," he managed. "It- I mean, thank *you!* It has been a pleasure- and- you know- I- You're- you are very nice-" *Dammit, the nervousness always made his accent stronger. And what the hell was he even saying?* "I- I, um, look forward to working with you more on this project!" Stupidly formal, but at least he couldn't be faulted for being too forward. As for asking her home? No- no, no, no. He couldn't – not like that.

And so, after the shortest of pauses, the expectant look on Simone's face settled into a polite smile. "Well, then, likewise! Good night, Vijay. Have a safe drive home!" With that, she slipped away, disappearing into the crowd with hardly even a backward glance.

Leaving Vijay shaken, glowing, and yet somehow crestfallen. Not that he'd expected anything more, he told himself fiercely as he stabbed at his phone screen to order a rideshare home. But still- still, she was...

She really was something, wasn't she?