

# UNDER THE PALMS

KAIRA ROUDA



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*For my mom,  
Patricia Robinson Sturdivant,  
who taught me to love books, the beach,  
art, and the magic of children's laughter.  
Thank you for being a fantastic grandmother, Mom.  
All twelve grandkids love you to the moon and back.*

I suddenly realized I was in California.

Warm, palmy air—air you can kiss—and palms.

—*Jack Kerouac*



# KINGSLEY FAMILY TREE

**Richard Kingsley**

John (son, with Richard's first wife, Mary)

Married to Rachel

(Second wife, Viki; no children)

**Ted (son, with Richard's wife Ann-Marie, who died in childbirth)**

Married to Paige

Daughters: Amy and Emily

**Sibley (daughter, with Richard's wife Cassie, an exotic dancer)**

Boyfriend: Colson Kelly

**Serena (Richard's last wife; now divorced)**

Married Roman Marino

Baby daughter: Sophia

**Walter (Richard's brother)**

## OC SCOOP

Attention, Kingsley fans: your favorite family is back in the limelight! That's right—hot off the presses in this month's issue of *Vanity Fair* is a four-page spread featuring the fabulous new president of Kingsley Global Enterprises, the OC's very own Paige Kingsley. We all remember how Richard Kingsley shocked the world when he named his daughter-in-law of twenty years as his successor, bypassing his sons and heirs to hand Paige the keys to their billion-dollar kingdom. Admit it, dear readers, we all raised a brow (as much as Botox permitted, of course) at the notion of the tennis-playing stay-at-home mom better known as Mrs. Ted Kingsley suddenly holding the reins of a Fortune 100 company . . . But could it be that Perfect Paige is something of a dark horse? In a few short months, she's made good on her promise to usher the company into a new era of philanthropy—guess all that time volunteering as CEO of the Orange County food bank taught her a thing or two about giving to those less fortunate. (And let's face it, who *isn't* less fortunate than the Kingsleys?)

This charitable spirit is certainly a new look for Kingsley Global, and those of us who worshipped at the altar of King Richard can hardly be blamed for wondering what the diehard capitalist thinks of this bold new direction. Is he proud of his protégée, or does he privately wish he could turn the page on Paige? And what about Ted, the golden child of the Kingsley clan, who was rumored to be Richard's first choice to helm the company before Paige got the gig? He plays the part of the doting husband in public, but one can't help but wonder how Ted feels about his wife sitting in the office he thought would be his.

Then again, maybe Ted's just happy that Paige is still alive, unlike his sister-in-law. Older brother John's wife, Rachel, as you'll recall, died tragically during a weekend mega-yacht trip to Catalina Island, à la Natalie Wood. They say she fell overboard

during the storm, poor thing. A chilling death, really. And a good reminder to always wear one's life preserver while aboard one's yacht.

Of course, John's marriage wasn't the only one to end abruptly that fateful weekend. It's no secret that Richard's fifth wife, Serena, absconded to Italy with her Italian lover and baby daddy shortly after their return to shore. Nubile young bachelorettes around the world are no doubt bidding her a *buon viaggio* as they daydream about becoming the sixth Mrs. Kingsley. We hope for Richard's sake that he finds a more faithful *signorina* this time around!

Speaking of *signorinas*, we hear Richard's wayward daughter, Sibley, also ditched her boyfriend after that weekend on the yacht. And good riddance. Colson was hardly appropriate marriage material for the Kingsleys' only princess, in this reporter's humble opinion. Then again, perhaps that's why Sibley dated him in the first place. The rebellious youngest Kingsley does seem to have a knack for making choices Daddy Dearest disapproves of. Which might explain why she's currently hanging out in Florida with her uncle Walter, Richard's estranged brother. Nobody seems to know quite what the two black sheep of the Kingsley clan are up to in the Sunshine State—but we do know that where Sibley goes, drama follows. We await her next scandal with bated breath.

Oh, who are we kidding—we await news of *all* the Kingsleys with bated breath. They are, after all, the family we love to hate and hate to love. Let's hope they never change.



*Richard Kingsley, CEO, and Paige Kingsley, President,  
cordially invite you to*

*THE FIRST ANNUAL  
KINGSLEY GLOBAL ENTERPRISES EXECUTIVE  
RETREAT*

*Plus-ones are invited for dinner each night.*

*Business casual daytime dress.*

*Formal evening attire.*

*February 24-26*

*Twin Palms Resort, Laguna Beach*

*Kindly RSVP to Justin by February 14.*

*The future is bright when we all work together.*

*Remember, teamwork makes the dream work.*

**FRIDAY**



# 1

## PAIGE

They say it's always the husband—and in my case, that's the truth. Well, to be clear, it's always my estranged husband, Ted. I remind myself I've found a good divorce attorney and take a deep, cleansing breath.

Through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls of my office, I see him, pacing back and forth, today's ridiculous gift in hand, trying to get my attention. It's childish, this behavior. Unoriginal. This is an *every-morning* performance: sometimes he brings doughnuts; other times, flowers, or a single sparkling water tied with a pink silk bow. He keeps making these offerings, I suppose expecting a different response from me. Or maybe it's all for show, for his family, for his ego.

I pick up my phone, pretend to be on a call, and wave him away with the flick of my hand. I shouldn't be surprised he has betrayed me again. Fool me once, and all that. But this time it's business. I'm not sad. No—this time, finally, I'm angry. For so many years, I looked at his handsome face and couldn't believe he was mine. The first word that came to my mind those days was *love*. Now the only word I have for him is *betrayal*. Oh, and the phrase *I'm filing for divorce*.

I know I need to talk to Richard, my father-in-law and boss, and tell him what I discovered and why I'm ending it with Ted. I spent the morning reading and rereading the letter from the city; the attached legal notices all amount to a big stop sign for the largest project Kingsley Global Enterprises has ever greenlit. The first big land deal I approved as president. All based on Ted's insistence it was a clean deal that would mean everything for Kingsley's future. Because of this

deal, Ted has driven a huge wedge of doubt into Richard's opinion of me, after I've worked so hard to turn things around at the company.

I know the employees have begun to see me as an effective leader. While I've been winning them over slowly, Richard's admiration has been slipping away quickly. It's the look in his piercing blue eyes, the downturn of his lip. He's disappointed in me, and I have no idea why. Could it be he's jealous of me? Of the fact the staff seems to like me? My eight months on the job have been marked by Kingsley Global Enterprises' reemergence into the community as a philanthropic force. A community-spirited company gains a certain type of protection from enemies, especially if ugly secrets are unearthed. And besides, I enjoy doing good in the community, and this company can certainly afford it. I could attend a fancy charity event every weekend evening if I choose to, and we have been equally well received by the media, too, touting fresh female leadership at one of Orange County's most powerful companies.

There's a knock on my door, and before I can say anything, Justin pops his head in.

"Hey, here's today's offering," he says with a crooked grin. Justin is my assistant—a dashing, too-good-looking, dimple-sporting man who is ten years younger than me. When Richard hired him six months ago, I was wary; he was too good to be true. Maybe he still is, but I'm embarrassed to say I enjoy every moment in his presence.

I stand up and walk over to his side. "What is it today?" I hold out my hand, and he drops a red silk bag into it.

"I'm guessing jewelry. He hasn't done that lately." Justin grins again, pushing a hand through his dark, thick hair. He's distractingly cute.

I open the pouch, and sure enough, it's a heart encrusted with pavé diamonds on a gold necklace. I drop it back into the pouch, trying to decide which of my twin daughters will get this latest gift. I roll my eyes.

Justin smiles at my reaction. "Are you all set for the retreat? Need anything else from me? If not, I'm going to head on over to the resort, get you checked in, and walk the space once more."

"I think I'm set. I just feel like I need to speak to Richard before I head over. Is he here? Can you try to get me a meeting?" I ask.

"Sure, let me go find out," Justin says. He touches my shoulder, and a tingle zips down my spine. "You know, he'll be at the retreat. He promised to attend. You could speak to him there."

"I know. I just want to get ahead of this land deal story. The reporter is running it tomorrow."

"It's not your deal, Paige. It was Ted's. Everyone knows that," Justin assures me. "I'll go find out if Richard has time to talk."

"Thank you," I say, closing the door behind him. Yes, it was Ted's land deal. Yes, his brother, John, agreed it was a great deal. But Richard said I had to make the final decision.

I believed Ted. Again. After everything he's done. After all his lies, his cheating, his gambling, his dalliance—or whatever it was—with his own stepmother. John assured me he'd looked at the numbers, and Ted promised he'd looked at all the land-use issues. Even Richard said the deal looked doable, but he left the ultimate decision up to me. I knew in my heart Ted was a liar. I never should have approved the deal. If I'm not careful, this will give Richard the ammunition he needs to get rid of me, replace me with someone else.

Sometimes, I think he wants to push me aside—I do. But other days, he seems . . . well, like the old grumpy Richard who is fond of me and likes having me around as president. You just never know where you stand with the Kingsley men. That's why, from now on, I will stand on my own

two feet. I'm stronger now. A role model for my daughters, who are working here this summer. Hear me roar. And I'm not going to allow any of them to walk all over me again.

Particularly—and especially—not Ted.

Justin's back. "He's already left for the resort. I'll head over, tell him you would like a meeting before the retreat starts. Don't look so worried. Everything's fine."

I shake my head. "I'm well aware this weekend will be a lot like herding cats, but I must make my mark. I have a lot to prove here. You know that."

"You do, and you are. Remember, when I first started here—working with you—I honestly didn't think you would make it."

He's told me this before, but it stings every time. "I know. I seemed too nice." I take a deep breath and walk over to my desk.

"Yep. And maybe easy to manipulate, for some people," he says. "But the truth is, you're tough and smart. So pack up your things, and I'll see you over there. It's a gorgeous day. Santa Ana winds are predicted tomorrow and Sunday, unfortunately."

"I didn't know that," I tell him, filling my briefcase with my computer, extra phone, and all the charging cables life requires these days. "I hope they aren't too strong." Those winds put everyone on edge. The air changes, people's moods shift. It's dry—and itchy. Really unsettling.

Justin sighs. "Well, it is what it is. At least it's warm and sunny, even with the winds."

I don't make eye contact. I remember the wind-driven fires in Laguna Beach, the roaring red flames of destruction above us on the hill, the ash swirling, choking the air. Our frantic evacuation. I shake my head, try to force the memories away.

The winds are not what we need this weekend. The winds remind you of how tentative everything is and how fast it can all be lost.

